

SIXPENCE IN HER SHOE

A Romantic Novel

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Romance

FOR an observant girl a school reunion can be an interesting occasion. To go back after, say, a couple of years and see what has happened to one's youthful companions can produce some quite surprising results. For instance, that pudding-faced girl who bit her nails has become a roaring beauty, and that dumb cluck in the lower fourth who was always sick on examination day is now a big-business executive. For Jean Dundass the occasion changes the whole course of her life. She meets Marilyn Grayson, an old school friend now a rising film star, and in no time at all finds herself installed in a lovely old neglected house on the banks of the Thames, coping with Marilyn's harassed doctor husband and their three small children, hovering on the fringe of the fantastic and glamorous world of the film studios.

By the Same Author

PROMISE OF DELIGHT TWO LOVES HAVE I
BOW TO THE STORM
STAR-CROSSED THERE WILL I FOLLOW
STRANGE PATHS WEAVE ME SOME WINGS
THE MAN FROM SINGAPORE
FAMILY ORCHESTRA THE WISE FORGET
HAVE COURAGE MY HEART REEF OF DREAMS
TO-MORROW'S HERO THE UNTAMED HEART
FAR BLUE HORIZONS PARTNERS FOR PLAYTIME
IT WAS ROMANCE * STRANGERS IN LOVE

MARY HOWARD

Sixpence in Her Shoe

A ROMANCE

COLLINS

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CHAPTER I

THE EXPRESS, after its brief stop at Leamington Spa, settled down to a steady rush towards London, an iron cradle, noisily and monotonously rocking the passengers to sleep. Jean Dundass was not one of those fortunates who easily sleep in trains, but as neither her book nor the passing scenery was wildly interesting, she leaned her smooth rust-coloured head back against the corner, and closed her eyes. Her face was oval and calm, and she had the pleasant sandiness that spoke of her Scottish ancestry, one of those attractive but not pretty faces that are found in the best nurseries and best hospitals, humorous, sensible, and calm. Her clothes, too, were simple and charming; an inexpensive brown tweed suit perfect for her colouring, pale yellow shirt, brown accessories, her hair fashionable in its short swinging bob with the youthful bang. If any of her somnolent fellow-travellers had noticed her before they fell asleep, their opinions would all have been the same. A nice, sensible, well-brought up, reliable girl. Therefore, her eyes, dark-lashed, grey, impish, full of a humorous and vital delight in life had always been rather a let-down. At school and college, teachers had always said, "Dundass is an excellent student—until she sees the funny or romantic side of anything. Then her sympathies and her sense of humour run away with her."

Behind her closed lids, Jean was remembering a recent old scholars' gathering she had attended, and Marilyn Falaise's spectacular entrance. At school, Marilyn had been the bad girl, bad at everything but music and dramatics, ravishingly beautiful, untruthful, untidy, imaginative, and so personally alluring that both junior girls and junior mistresses would brave the censure of the Headmistress to get her out of the trouble she well deserved. Though Jean was never infatuated nor had any illusions about Marilyn, she was her friend, a friendship that was deplored by the Headmistress. No one could understand how a sensible,

clever girl like Jean could possibly take up with Marilyn. But Jean could see that in the antiseptic and refined atmosphere of a girl's public school Marilyn was like a caged peacock, that she had little money, no sense, no people but a disreputable, foot-loose, artistic father, that her escapades brightened school life considerably because they were usually wildly funny, and that unless she did have at least one person who knew when to tell her not to be a fool, she was bound to end in catastrophe before she left school. Finally, when she was seventeen, she had eloped with a medical student called Grayson, had married him, lived in London, worked as a film extra, and this year, to the excitement of practically every ex-scholar, had made a brief but impressive appearance in a very successful British film.

The old scholars' tea and garden party had been as usual amusing, sad and interesting. Amusing because of the politely hidden superiority which the women with Careers patronised the Merely Married, and the less tactfully hidden superiority with which the Women With Families pitied the women who merely had Careers. Sad because inevitably so many high-flown youthful aspirations had fallen by the wayside. Interesting because these women were so widely different from the girls they had been. The child might be father to the man, but certainly it wasn't mother to the woman. Who on earth would have suspected that the brilliant Rachel Kerr would be a suburban housewife, entirely preoccupied with the "Correct thing" or that fat little Sally Bland, an affectionate, good-humoured duffer at school, should have become a Juvenile Court officer. Jean did not quite know why she had come, for she had little interest in the reminiscences, and her closest friends had been made since leaving school. She was not a person who sought comfort in the past—her youth had been a training and preparation, and now she was ready for life. Perhaps it was a tying up of ends. She had taken her domestic science diploma, recently her much-loved parents had died, and she and her married sister had sold up their old home. The past had been peaceful, good and happy, and she was grateful for it . . . but now she was ready for the future. She had gone to the reunion with a sense of a final farewell

to her girlhood. It was a little surprising to find Marilyn's name on everyone's lips. Even Miss Elsom, the Headmistress, grey and formidable though kindly, after congratulating her on her diploma, and chatting about her future ambitions, had said :

"The—the Falaise girl? The one who has gone on the pictures? I don't suppose you hear from her now, Jean?"

"No, I've not heard since she married, except, of course, that I saw her in *Entrapped*. Only a small part, but she was very good."

"Hmmm, I'm glad to hear it," said the Head severely.

Jean had hung on to the corners of her mouth, which began to twitch uncontrollably, and asked innocently : "Do you mean you're glad I haven't heard from her, or that she had a success?"

"Both, both of course," said the Headmistress, ignoring the gleam of mischief in Jean's eyes. "I'm glad the girl is making something of her life. I didn't expect it. I will tell you now that I was infinitely relieved when she left. She was most unprincipled and a bad influence on you . . . there was a time when I was considering asking both your parents to take you away, if, of course, I could have ever found Mr. Falaise at a permanent address. It was the French blood in her, I suppose." She smiled suddenly over her spectacles. "However, you settled down after she left, and I'm glad to hear you've got your diploma . . . a thorough training is essential for any kind of . . ." Her voice petered out with astonishment. Exquisitely dressed, beautiful as a dark angel, Marilyn Falaise had come into the room. She caught Jean's glance, tossed her a little secret smile, and sailed down upon the Head, acting to perfection the part of the Most Distinguished Old Scholar. "My dear Miss Elsom—how nice to see you again, and Jean, darling."

Jean received her kiss with enthusiasm. "Miss Elsom," she said, "has been making some very revealing comments on our school careers. Very gentle, considering what perfect little brutes we were!"

Marilyn had cast her glance round the room, conscious that every woman present was drinking in every detail of her superlatively elegant appearance. "It must be so interesting,"

she said vaguely, "to watch how each generation of girls turns out."

"It is," said Miss Elsom darkly. "And very surprising too."

Afterwards, over cocktails at the local hotel, Marilyn carelessly thrust her invitation at Jean.

"What a collection!" she commented. "My dear, did you ever see anything like them? So respectable—and so very dull! You're the only one besides myself who has the faintest sense of chic."

Jean had to admit that the Old Scholars were not a glamorous group. Marilyn lit a cigarette, her dark eyes smouldering. "I couldn't spare the time, really, but I wanted to come. When I remember how neat and nice they all were, and I hadn't even a decent pair of stockings because father never sent me any clothes or money. When I remember the bad marks I had for dirty nails and untidiness, I just had to come and show off. . . . Does that seem horribly petty to you, Jean?"

Jean shook her head. "It seems very understandable."

Marilyn smiled. "You were always a good friend, Jean. Can I help you now? Look, don't rush into the first job you're offered to keep body and soul together. Come and stay with us until you've found what you want. . . ."

Jean hesitated.

"Oh, Jim won't mind. He's too busy with his patients . . . and I'm busy too. I mean it, come and stay as long as you like. We've got heaps of room, it's an enormous old house that was once a vicarage, with a garden and orchard and stabling. You won't be in the way at all. We'll be glad to have you. There's plenty to do at home, you can work your passage if you like."

Jean had made no definite decision, but after she and her sister had settled their parents' affairs she had written, had received an enthusiastic note from Marilyn, and here she was on her way. The train, suddenly roaring into the numerous road bridges and tunnels of outer London made her start and open her eyes. It was kind of Marilyn to offer her a home, and she would willingly work her passage—a doctor and a film actress with three small children must

need quite a lot of organising, and as she remembered, organisation was one of Marilyn's missing talents. She powdered her nose, pulled her brown beret on at a jaunty angle, and collected her possessions. She wondered if Marilyn would meet her. When the train drew into the station she peered eagerly among the crowds, and walked very slowly down the platform, so that she would not miss Marilyn if she were there. She waited until the passengers slowly cleared away, leaving only one tall, rather thin man, shabby, thirty-ish, with a clever, tired, kindly face, who peered in a rather short-sighted way towards her. Finally he seemed to come to some decision, and, raising his hat, approached her. She noticed his frayed and not too clean shirt cuffs, the missing button on his waistcoat, and that his thick, waving dark hair badly needed cutting. She also noticed the curious gentleness about him, the sweetness and humour of the rather short-sighted grey eyes.

'Are you Miss Dundass?'

"Why, yes."

"Oh, well, I'm Jim Grayson, Marilyn's husband. How do you do?"

They shook hands, smiling a little vaguely.

"I'm awfully sorry, but I must hurry you off. My surgery starts at six, and we just have time to get back." He took her case and led the way to where his car was parked, and in reply to her unspoken question: "Marilyn sent her apologies—she had to go out. Her agent telephoned about a part, and she had to see him this afternoon."

As they approached the car, three small faces looked out, three small noses squashed against the glass. Jim Grayson waved, and was greeted by answering waves.

"The kids," he explained. "It's the help's afternoon off"—he looked a little glum—"so I brought them along." He opened the car and introduced the occupants with a friendly and detached air. "Children, this is Mummy's friend, Miss Dundass, who is coming to stay with us. Miss Dundass, this is Jose, she's six."

Jose was tall and thin for her age, and she wore an expensive little coat which she had grown out of some time ago, and which displayed a vast expanse of skinny little leg.

She was dark, exactly like Marilyn, very beautiful. She said, "How do you do," in an accomplished social manner, and seemed a little surprised when Jean said, "How do you do," gravely in return, without exclaiming over her cuteness and precocity. "These are the twins," said Jim, "Johnny and Jane."

The twins, a pair of russet apples on one twig, unplugged their thumbs momentarily by way of greeting, and then hurriedly plugged them back into their mouths again.

"They're both three," said Jose in a disparaging tone.

"Hallo, twins," said Jean, with a little smile. She took the seat next to Jim, and after a few false starts the old car came to life and they proceeded through London on their way. The children gazed through the window at the crowds, the traffic, the fountains in Trafalgar Square, and when they passed Buckingham Palace, Jose said casually: "That's where the dear Queen lives," as though she were in the habit of dropping in to tea. Jean laughed, and Jim glanced at her.

"I'm afraid," said Jim, "you won't find ours a very restful house to stay in."

Jean, who had just been wondering why on earth a budding film star with a busy doctor husband, three children and apparently a very unreliable help, should invite a house guest, looked at him inquiringly.

"I mean, I know you and Marilyn are old school friends, and that, but, really, Miss Dundass, I think you'd be much more comfortable in an hotel."

This apparently inhospitable remark came out so frankly that for a moment Jean was nonplussed. "I was glad to accept the invitation," she said. "I haven't a great deal of money to spare, and no job as yet. And I really don't care for hotel life . . . but if it's going to be inconvenient, of course I'll go to a hotel. But I'd better see Marilyn first. She seemed very anxious that I should come."

"I'll bet she was," said Marilyn's husband, smiling. "I feel, Miss Dundass, that I should stop the car and let you out. I know Merry's gifts of persuasion, bless her guile-filled heart. If you see her, you'll probably be lost."

"I don't understand!"

"No?" His eyebrows went up quizzically. "Well, at the risk of an outrageous disloyalty to my wife, I've warned you. When you wake up in the lonely mill-house, gagged and bound and guarded by a mysterious Chinaman, I shall say I told you so!"

"You mean—Marilyn wants me to stay and help her?"

"What do you think? You have a domestic science diploma—Marilyn told me. She told me with awe and wonder, as though it were the Nobel Peace Prize. I warn you, anyone with the faintest conception of domestic organisation will find our house practically virgin territory."

Jean laughed again; even this brief glimpse of Jim and the children had told her that. "Marilyn never was a very efficient organiser," she said; "but she's awfully good at her own job," she said defensively.

He glanced at her again, and there was a little frown between his brows. She noticed how sensitive his mouth was, and the long thin rather beautiful hands on the wheel. "Don't misunderstand me, Miss Dundass," he said a little sharply; "I'm not complaining." It was a rap over the knuckles, and she was silent, recognising his edgy pride. "I'm well aware that Marilyn ought to have well-trained, well-paid domestic help to take the household off her shoulders. She has beauty and talent . . . she deserves her chance; she deserves it, and this year it seems coming her way. . . ." He paused. "At the money I can afford it's impossible to get." And Jean remembered Marilyn at the Old Scholars' Reunion. The pale-grey suit that whispered of Hanover Square in every inch of cut and line, the scarf of sables, the long pale suede gloves, the hat of matching moire, just a twirl of silk on her sleek black hair, but a twirl that spelt the genius of a great designer. Well, film work paid well, even if one only played small parts. Marilyn would have to spend most of her earnings on her appearance.

"I think you're pulling my leg," she said quietly. "Marilyn and I had a long talk—she knows I'm interested in hospital work, or a good school matronship, not private service of any kind. I'm on my own now, since my people died. I must take the best-paid job I can get."

"Well," he said shortly, "don't say I didn't warn you."

"I promise," she said lightly, and turning in the seat, began to talk to the children. The twins unplugged simultaneously and burst into a chorus of chatter. They were beautiful, round, rosy, grubby things, and all three children had a natural assurance of manner without any suggestion of shyness. Only Jose leaned back, her chin propped gracefully on her hand, in a perfect imitation of her mother. She had exactly the same slender, graceful neck and arrogant little tilt to her chin, only her mouth, oversensitive, was like her father's. She watched and listened to Jean with a faintly detached suspicion, which Jean carefully and wisely ignored.

They were now running parallel with the river, in a low-lying district of factories and shabby, London-grimed little houses and dark railway arches. To Jean's surprise they did not follow the main road which led out to the suburbs, but turned down a side street of little shops, lined with hawkers' barrows, towards the river.

They turned a corner by a tall factory wall, and came out on the bank of the river. There was a little old church by the riverside, with a few dusty London trees about it. It had stood there, reflected in the water, for some two hundred years, ever since Whitensea had been a little country village on the south bank of the river. And there, sure enough, beside it, with the factories and wharfs crowding against its walls, stood a large old eighteenth-century house, shabby and beautiful as a faded old belle, with its columned portico, and graceful iron railings; and behind, waving gently in the river breeze, were the smoke-grimed trees of an ancient orchard. There was a brass plate on the door, and a doctor's red lamp hung in the portico. Jim drew up at the gate, and opened the car door. "In you go," he said, "I'll leave the car in the street in case there are any more calls to make to-night."

The children scrambled out, Jose darting through the gate and round the back way, and the two younger ones more slowly, trotting carefully together, hand in hand. Jim took her bag out of the car, found his keys, and led the way up to the door. On the step she turned, and looked back across the river. Over the other side, the trees of the

Embankment curved their soft green lines, and to the right the towers of Westminster swam in the evening haze, one or two windows glinting flame in the sun. Two barges went downstream and then a little sailing dinghy, its white sail flapping and filling as it tacked into the breeze. Jim watched her curiously.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of it?"

She glanced at him, and said frankly: "It's strange and dirty, and very beautiful."

"Come in," he said quietly, and opened the door into a marble-flagged, pillared hall, with an exquisite staircase curling up from an alcove at the far end. There was a worn-out rug spread upon the tiles, which would have done with scrubbing, and various children's toys, a tricycle, a push-chair, and several grubby pairs of wellington boots. She could hear the children shouting somewhere at the back of the house. Jim opened a heavy panelled oak door into a long, lovely room which looked out over the pavement and the river. It was furnished indiscriminately with all kinds of furniture and rugs. A modern steel and glass coffee table, badly cracked, screamed at a lovely Sheraton bookcase. There was again the air of untidiness and unkemptness; books, papers, toys; bills stuck on the mantelpiece, a large ink stain on the cheap rug before the fire, photographs of the theatrical great stuck about unframed. It reminded Jean so much of Marilyn's room at School that she would have known that she lived here. But the room, spacious, friendly, beautifully proportioned, filled with light from the westering sun, water shadows glinting on its ceiling, could be nothing else but beautiful.

Jim glanced at his watch. "I'll put the kettle on," he said. "There's half an hour before surgery; I'll just have time. I use the room across the hall for a waiting-room, and the little study that leads off it for a surgery."

"Let me do it," said Jean impulsively.

"No. To-night at any rate you are going to be a guest," he said. "In any case, Marilyn will be in soon and she'll show you your room. Sit down and have a cigarette. I won't be long. I'll give the brood something to eat in the kitchen."

He went out, leaving her alone.

She went over to the window and looked out at the lovely river prospect, sitting down in the deep window-seat. It needed painting, it was scratched and rubbed by little shoes, and dirty with finger-marks. She had that intense feeling of atmosphere, of a sort of longing on the part of the house, of needing, and steeled herself to resist it. There was so much here that needed caring for, and it was in her to care for things and for people. She judged, in any case, that if what Jim said was true—that this invitation from Marilyn was all part of an elaborate plan to get her to stay and help run this unsystematic household—that they could not possibly afford to employ her. And she, if she were sensible, could not afford to stay. Although it seemed fantastic, she knew Marilyn's methods of old. If she wanted anything, she always used the indirect approach so that a thing was accomplished before anyone realised it.

Jim came back, bearing a large tin tray on which was a cracked teapot of coarse brown china, two beautiful old Dresden cups, hand-painted with fruit and vegetables, glowing purple grapes and fairy-like asparagus, pale-yellow pears with a ribbon-like paring coiling away into the pattern, an unopened bottle of milk, a packet of lump sugar, and a large plate of buttered scones. He set them down on a low table near the fire.

"It doesn't look," he said, "as though Marilyn's going to be back yet. Will you do the honours?"

She sat down on the settee, avoiding a broken spring, and poured out, handing him a cup.

"How about the children?"

"Oh, I've given them mugs of milk and a pile of bread and jam," he said.

Jean took her bun and cup of tea, remembering Marilyn's words: "We've got a Nanny, thank heaven, so the children are no trouble," and said, "Have you got a good Nanny? Does she have complete charge of the children?" It was curiosity that made her ask, for the appearance of the three children did not suggest any particularly efficient care; she wanted to know if this was all part of this elaborate fairy tale of Marilyn's.

Jim said cautiously: "Well, she does have complete charge of the children when she's here." But he did not say that she was good.

Jean said: "It sounds as though she wasn't often here."

"Well," he admitted, "she's not what you would call reliable."

He glanced at his watch, and rose. "I must go and open the surgery door," he said. "I shall have patients arriving soon." He hesitated, walked over to the window, silhouetted against the sunshine, tall, thin, worried, and she felt a swift stir of sympathy for him. He hesitated, and turned back to her as though he would speak, then said: "I'll be busy until eight at least. Can you amuse yourself until then?"

"I'll try," she said, smiling. And as he reached the door: "Just one thing."

"Yes?"

"If Marilyn isn't home until later, what time do the children go to bed?"

He smiled too, that curiously sweet and gentle smile that made his tired face so attractive. "Theoretically the twins go now, at six, and Jose at seven."

"All right, I'll see to them," she said, "but I'm not weakening. It's only for to-night."

"Well, thanks all the same."

She heard his footsteps cross the black-and-white marble hall outside, and the door opposite close, and then rose and carried the tray through into the kitchen. The children were sitting at a bare deal table, finishing their tea. It was the sort of big, old-fashioned kitchen that Jean loved, shabby and quite grubby, distempered in a dismal institutional green, and painted in a gloomy chocolate brown. But it had space to move about in, a big window looking out on the garden, plenty of cupboard room. She looked out, and her heart gave a little lift of pleasure, for here at least a good deal of care and thought had been given. The garden was nearly all lawn, smooth and well cut, and at the far end great London plane trees, as old as the house, towered up to the sky. Near the house was a herbaceous border in the full bloom of early summer, and old well-tended fruit trees trained against the walls. A broad terrace of paved stone

lay between the house and the lawn, and there was a beautifully shaped and very old mulberry tree surrounded by a circular wooden bench. A swing hung from one of the branches.

"What a lovely garden," she exclaimed. "Who does the gardening?"

"Daddy," said Jose, wriggling down from her chair and coming to stand by Jean's side, "and sometimes old George helps him. But he's not much good for anything but straight digging."

Jean smiled. Here was a little pig with very long ears. Jose apparently listened very closely to grown-up conversation and could produce it *ad lib*. She added, carelessly: "He's silly, isn't he?"

"Who?"

"Daddy—Mummy says it's absurd to do anything that a lesser intelligence can do just as well or better."

Jean glanced at her sharply, but there was nothing precocious or deliberately clever about her remark. She was only solemnly repeating what she had heard. "She's too clever," thought Jean. "And too thin, and she wants her hair washing." The twins had struggled down from their chairs and were outside, digging laboriously in a sand-pit at the edge of the paved terrace.

"Well, it isn't always the case," Jean said cautiously, because it was so obvious that Jose thought her mother quite wonderful and believed implicitly that what she said was right. "In this case, you see, George is only good for straight digging, so he can't do it so well as your daddy."

"Um," said Jose noncommittally, obviously thinking out this new angle.

"Have you finished your milk?" There was a full glass on the table.

"I don't like milk!"

"No? I do. Do you mind if I finish it for you?"

"We-ell," Jose conceded, "I might just take a sip."

Jean handed her the glass and she finished it, puppy-like, rather than let it go elsewhere. Jean suspected dramatic scenes over food, in which Jose obviously enjoyed being the centre of the storm.

"I'm going to wash up," said Jean, "so if you'd like to go and play for a few minutes, you can, then I'll put you to bed."

"Sometimes I don't go to bed until ten."

"Really?" Jean expressed only the mildest interest. "But to-night you're going just after the twins."

Jose's mouth set, as though she was going to offer some sort of opposition, then, following another train of thought, she said: "I suppose you're some kind of a new servant."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because you're going to wash up and put us to bed. Mummy's a film star, and she doesn't wash up."

"Nor put you to bed?"

"No—she comes up to see us when we're in bed." Jose's eyes suddenly shone. "She looks lovely, and smells gorgeous. She's a film actress, you see. One day she's going to be a great star. Do you know my mummy?"

"Yes. I know her very well."

"If you're going to be a new kind of servant, I shall like you better than Nanny."

"Why?"

"She drinks," said Jose succinctly, and went out into the garden where, in a moment, Jean heard her authoritatively ordering the twins about.

The fire in the boiler was not lit, so Jean set a kettle on the gas stove, and a big pan for the children's bath, and then went to fetch an overall out of her case in the hall. She could hear the innumerable voices, the coughings, slight movements, rustling of magazines in the waiting-room, and wondering what Jim did about hot water. Surely it was a necessity in a surgery? She went back into the kitchen. The bare table on which the children had had their tea was grey with accumulated dirt, so she scrubbed it hard with cold water and scouring powder, scrubbed it viciously as the whispers about her clamoured and appealed, a myriad voices now beside that of the old, beautiful, neglected house. A professional man, trying to work and serve, harassed by petty domestic burdens? Three charming neglected children. And Marilyn? Who was she to criticise Marilyn. Easy enough to say one should

not take on a husband and children unless one was prepared to serve them. Life and passion did not make plans. Marilyn was brilliant and beautiful, and always had been hopelessly incompetent in domestic matters. Why should she not follow her own particular star? And why had she herself gone to the trouble of learning her job thoroughly if it were not to free others, differently talented and gifted. For there was something in what Marilyn said, and Jean knew now that she had deliberately planned this, deliberately stayed away to-day, so that all this neglect would speak pleadingly to Jean.

She took the kettle off the gas stove, and poured boiling water on the dish powder, a sharp little frown between her brows, fighting off the clinging fingers of appeal. It was ridiculous even to contemplate it. She was well trained, she had her diploma, and she knew well that she was superlatively good at her job. In a hospital or institution, or even at a big, wealthy house, she could demand a good wage, she would be given regular hours, plenty of time for herself. Here she would have hardly any wage, and she would never finish . . . here there would always be some job crying to be done. But against this she heard Jose's voice saying firmly, "She drinks!" and wondered if this were true, if Jim and Marilyn knew, or if it were just a haphazard accusation out of Jose's fertile imagination. And even as she thought this, she was automatically washing up, putting the things away, without thinking, taking the Dresden cups through into the sitting-room, opening the Sheraton china cabinet, removing a few dog-eared children's books, a piece of unfinished knitting, and some writing materials, and setting the cups out so that their colours caught the light; automatically finding a work basket, putting the knitting in it, the writing materials in the bureau, and the children's books on the hall stand, to be carried upstairs when she took the children up to bed. She stopped, standing in the hall, as she realised what she was doing. These things were no effort or worry to her, she automatically tidied and ordered as she went on. It was second nature. Her breath caught in a little laugh as though a tentacle had actually reached and caught her wrist.

She went into the kitchen and called the children in to be

washed for bed. She did the twins first, two dark-eyed cherubs from a Romney painting, and then Jose. She would have liked a good bath full of hot water, and gone in for an orgy of shampooing too, but she contented herself with washing them thoroughly, supervising teeth cleaning, and an obviously long needed trimming of toe and finger nails. They submitted with an interest that spoke of novelty. The twins slept in a small room off the large day nursery. The house had obviously been built in the days when even country vicars could afford large families, and Jose slept in a little room off the wide shadowy landing. Jean tucked the twins up, and they lifted rosy faces to be kissed, their robin's eyes already glazed with sleep, and then went in to Jose, who sat up importantly, reading a large book.

"Are you going to put the light out?" she inquired apprehensively.

"I was—do you usually have it out?"

"Well, yes." There was more than reluctance in her tone.

"I'll leave the hall light on so that you can see it, but I'll be in the sitting-room. You can easily call."

"Norah says this house is haunted. She says after dark you can hear the rustling of a silk dress, and the tap of high-heeled shoes. She says one has to have a drop of something warm to keep the horrors away."

"I don't believe it—and, anyway, I don't see anything horrifying in the sound of silk and high heels. It's a pretty sound. I expect she hears your mummy coming to say good night."

"Of course, she does sound like that," said Jane in relief. She nestled down, and Jean tucked the clothes round her shoulders. Her lips did not come up with the sleepy eagerness that the twins had shown. She did not offer to kiss Jean. She said: "How long do you think Mummy will be? Do you think she'll come?"

"Of course she'll come."

"Sometimes I think she won't ever come back . . . it's so horrid here for her."

"As soon as she comes, she'll come up to kiss you good night."

"How about if I'm asleep?"

"She'll kiss you, anyway. Good night."

She went downstairs slowly, walking firmly so that she could be plainly heard. The twins would already be fast asleep, but she knew that Jose would lie awake for a long while.

As she went downstairs the telephone rang. It was for the doctor, a confinement case. She fetched Jim, who had just seen his last patient out and closed the surgery door. As she went into the kitchen she heard him comforting the anxious father.

"Now, don't panic, Mr. Smithers. . . . 'Telephone the nurse at once, and I'll run along myself as soon as I can get the car out."

He came into the kitchen, blinking a little, looking tired and pale. "Can you wait until I make some coffee?" she asked.

"If it won't take a minute."

"The kettle's boiling now."

He seemed to accept her then, as though she were already part of the household. She made him a sandwich from the cold meat in the pantry, and he sat in the kitchen and ate it.

"Something's different," he said, looking round. "You've scrubbed the table."

"Yes," she said.

"It looks nice."

"I've got to get away," she thought. "I must get away or I'm caught." He went out, and she heard the car drive away. She could not leave the children alone in the house, but she packed her overall back in her case and left her hat and coat ready to put on the minute the nurse returned. But in spite of this, she went to the sitting-room to draw the curtains, and searched the kitchen cupboard for some less valuable cups than the Dresden so that she could set a tea-tray. Jim might be cold and tired when he returned. The telephone bell rang again, this time it was Marilyn. She drew in her breath, to indulge in a flow of indignant reproach, but Marilyn forestalled her.

"My dear," she said, "what you're thinking I can imagine. Are the kids all right? . . . Good. Listen, Jean, I've got it. I've got the part, isn't it exciting? It's about

a Victorian gold-digger, and I'm to play the lead . . . it's from that play of Dane's that ran all last season." As she spoke, Jean could see her in the curls and satins of the 'forties. "Look, I'm in town now with a party, it's an awful bore, but I must stay a little while. I'll be back by twelve. You're to have the little room by Jose's. Did Jim get you some food? . . . I was sure I'd be back before Norah went out, but one thing led to another, you know how it is? I'm terribly excited. It's an enormous amount of money, which will be a godsend, and Lowitz is producing. . . . Look, Jean, darling, try not to go to sleep before I come. . . . I'm longing to have a talk. Must go. 'Bye."

Jean put down the receiver. It seemed to her that the door had been slowly closing on her escape. Marilyn could even afford to employ her now. She would not wait until Marilyn came. Her best-laid plans, like those of mice and men, were going astray. The minute Jim or that Norah returned she was off to an hotel, to-night while she could go, while she was free. But the minutes went by, and no one came . . . the house was quiet with the murmuring quiet of old houses, the panelling creaking now and then as it cooled after the warmth of the day. It was quite dark now, but the moon was rising, making lovely gleams of lights and shapes of ships along the river. She took the secateurs out of the tool shed, and cut some delphiniums, carefully here and there, so that her robbery did not show. It was all part of the strange day and night, to stand in this old walled garden, cutting flowers by moonlight. A tug hooted on the river, and the engines of the nearby factory hummed and purred. Two cats on the wall sat down, tucked their paws under, and began a war of muttered threats at each other. Far in the distance, somewhere along the embanked road outside, she heard two voices raised in unsteady song. She went into the house, found a big earthenware jug, filled it with flowers, and set it in the sitting-room in front of the gold-framed mirror on the panelling. The voices were close at hand now. They were, in fact, on the front doorstep.* Someone was fiddling inefficiently with a key. A sudden anger seized her. She crossed the hall, switching on the lights, and threw open

the door. A large, blowsy blonde, obviously in a high state of intoxication, was standing on the doorstep, or, rather, hanging for support round the neck of a little man who seemed to be all hat and ears. She peered belligerently at Jean and shook her head.

"Mus' be the wrong house," she said finally.

The little man, catching the expression in Jean's blue eyes, quailed visibly.

"Norah's birthday, miss," he said. "She's a little excited . . . she'll be quite all right in the morning."

Jean was suddenly past reasoning. She was past standing out any longer. It was as though she suddenly took a step forward, and in taking it she took the house, and the child in it contained, into her charge. She said coldly: "Have you anywhere you can go to-night?"

"Go?" repeated Norah in astonishment.

"Have you any friends, or any home to go to?"

Norah drew herself up shakily. "I can go to my friend's," she said, with what appeared to be a gesture of disdain. "My friend's wanted me to stay. Do . . . do you think I'd come back to this place . . . unless I had to?"

"In that case," said Jean clearly, "perhaps you'll give me your key? You can call back for your clothes and money in the morning."

"And who may you be?" demanded Norah truculently.

Jean did not even pause. "I'm the new house-keeper," she said.

There was a silence, a slight argument, and finally Norah threw her key dramatically on the hall floor, and bursting into tears allowed her little friend to lead her away into the night. Jean drew in a breath of relief and shut the door. She looked down at her hands and found she was trembling with anger, and in her hand was the latch-key. She thought immediately: "It's my key now." And suddenly, with swift decision, she picked up her case, her hat and coat and carried them upstairs into the little room next to Jose's.

She opened the wardrobe, hung up her coat, and put her hat on the shelf. She had moved in.

There was the sound of car engines outside, and she looked out. Jim's shabby car was at the door, and behind it

a sleek, dark, expensive two-seater. She heard Marilyn's voice and excited little laugh.

"This is my husband. Jim, this is Lance Saxelby and Phil Lowitz. They've brought me home. Oh, Jim, I've got the part. . . ."

Jean went slowly downstairs. The door opened, and they came in, Marilyn, beautiful, excited, her dark eyes shining, her cheeks flushed. She wore the pale grey costume, and carried her hat in her hand.

The three men stood behind her like a chorus, Jim, tired, stooped, and yet obviously glad of her happiness and success ; and, well dressed, debonair, smiling a little at her bubbling enthusiasm, Saxelby. A good-looking blond man, with a curiously embracing charm. A little apart—silent, stood Lowitz. A fine drawn distinguished man, watching Marilyn with an intensity which gave Jean a vague sense of unease -- his face had the yellow colour of old ivory and his hair was thick, worn rather long, a little grey. It was only when he moved forward to take her hand that Jean realised that he was crippled, that he dragged his left foot, malformed and lame.

Marilyn ran forward to embrace Jean.

"This is my friend, Jean Dundass, who is staying with us," she said. "Is Norah in?"

Jean looked from one to the other a little sheepishly. "I'm afraid," she said, "she came home drunk, so I sacked her. If it's all right with you both—I've moved in."

CHAPTER 2

AT SIX O'CLOCK Jean's alarm clock rang, and she woke up feeling appallingly sleepy, for it had been well after midnight before their visitors had gone. Flushed with triumph over her contract, and gratification on hearing that Jean was going to stay, Marilyn had insisted upon opening a bottle of Grandpa Grayson's port. Jim's grandfather had apparently been an exceedingly long-lived old gentleman from whom they had great expectations, but who in the end had only left them six dozen of his excellent port. It constituted their entire cellar, and they only opened a bottle on high days and holidays—this particular evening, they both declared, was both high and holiday, so Jim plunged down into the depths of the noble wine cellar, where the sixty-odd bottles rested with a vague air of dusty snobbishness, as though they knew that they were about the only suitable occupants of the grand old house.

Jean whisked the heavy cut-glass ports out of the cabinet, polished them, and set them on a small table before the fireplace where she had set the big earthenware jug full of the flowers she had picked from the garden. The lamplight hid the chipped paint and the dust, the lovely room had temporarily come into its own again. Marilyn talked excitedly to the two movie men, while Jean leaned back, listening, watching, his thin face very tired. Jean sat just outside the circle of light where she could watch and listen. Marilyn was the centre of everything and she deserved to be. Her beauty was a living, lovely thing, lit by the first flush of success . . . it was reflected in the men's admiring eyes. Jim was not speaking much, nor was Lowitz. Like Jean, both men were leaning back out of the circle of light, Jim, because he was dog-tired, Lowitz because, perhaps, he wanted to hide. He caught her eyes on him once, and drew his foot with its thick-soled shoe sharply out of sight behind his good foot, and she flushed sensitively, distressed that he should have thought she might have noticed it. She met

his eyes, black, pupilless, in the shadow, but he glanced at her and away, indifferently, with a deliberate carelessness that was almost insulting. She felt the colour sting her face again, and the little knot of anger and dislike against him rose tautly in her heart, until Saxelby, telling a story, turning with one of his expressive gestures, knocked up the shade of the lamp and in the light she saw again the fine, deep sharp lines of pain etched about his mouth. Her anger melted, realising that under his smooth, successful frontage, the beautiful clothes, the fastidious cleanliness that almost amounted to dandyism, was a morbid defence mechanism that leapt to smite down pity, even before it rose in watching eyes.

Saxelby was speaking to Jean, dragging her attention away from Lowitz. Saxelby was watching her, smiling with his vividly blue eyes. He had a blond Nordic type of good looks, his hair so fair that it glistened with a silvery gleam, and a lithe, physical magnetism that was so apparent that it was almost overpowering, and to Jean faintly repulsive. He was so sure of himself, of his attraction, of his good looks. He took the centre of the stage with Marilyn, aware that he and she made a brilliant pair, and yet he could not leave Jean out, he had to cast a little net for her too. Her glance, so clear and grave, so lacking in admiration, startled his vanity.

"Miss Dundass is lost in thought," he said lightly. "She didn't hear what I said."

"I beg your pardon."

"Lance asked if you're going to enjoy smoothing the way of a film star?" said Marilyn.

"And of a doctor?" said Jim quietly. Marilyn's head turned to him, and her hand went out to his with a gesture of pure affection. There was a little jerk of attention from the other two men, their eyes drawn from her to her husband.

"We were forgetting you, Doctor," said Lowitz slowly. "How do you feel about this? Film marriages are notoriously unsettled. Do you feel capable of charting these troubled seas?" There was a little touch of cynical mockery in his voice. "Do you believe a wife can mix a career with marriage?"

"You sound like a magazine quiz," said Marilyn quickly.

Jim looked up with his quick, sweet smile. "I don't think film marriages are any different from others," he said. "It's merely that one *hears* about them breaking up. It's the people that count, not the circumstances so much."

"As a doctor and a married man you'd know better than me," said Lowitz in his light, detached, isolated voice, with its little hint of contempt. "What do you think makes a successful marriage?"

Jim looked across at him, and said at once: "Fidelity," quite simply and gravely.

There was a little silence, and Jean saw the mockery go out of Lowitz's face, leaving it startled and disturbed. Marilyn rose with one of her swift and lovely movements, and sat by Jim on the settee, her hand slipping into his, her brilliant eyes smiling up into his tired face, the amethyst taffeta of her blouse a splash of fine colour in the lamplight.

Saxelby rose, huge, handsome, laughing, as though he was defending something that Jim had attacked. "Nonsense," he said protestingly. "I've met several rigidly faithful couples who are completely unhappy."

A little flash of something like temper shone momentarily in Lowitz's black eyes. "Doctor Grayson doesn't mean merely physical fidelity, you overgrown wolf," he said coldly. For a moment Jean thought she saw the other man's mouth tighten with answering anger, but in a second he was smiling again, laughing and debonair. "Ah well," he said, "Doctor Grayson has two wives now—one talented and artistic, and the other a charming domestic one." His eyes smiled at Jean to where she sat in the shadow, poised on the arm of the settee.

Lowitz rose suddenly. "I'm tired, I must go. Good night, Doctor. . . . Good night, Marilyn. You'll see your agent to-morrow? Good, I'll bring the script over one afternoon, if I may. I'd like to go over it with you alone before we start. We shall only be disturbed at the studio. Good night, Miss Dundass." He nodded to her briefly and limped quickly over to the door. Saxelby still sat there as if he had no intention of going. "Jim looks dead tired too," said Marilyn. "Have you had a rough day, darling?"

"I had a pretty difficult baby this evening," he said. He

certainly looked very tired. Marilyn was suddenly smitten with remorse. "You must go, Lance. I am a horror, thinking of my beastly career. It's more wonderful to bring a baby into the world than act in pictures."

Jim smiled good-naturedly. "It might be a very ordinary baby, but a very good picture."

Jean suddenly felt tired. She excused herself, made her good nights, and went upstairs. Looking out of her bedroom window she saw the two men go to the car, Lowitz's limping figure and the tall, elegant figure of Lance, the light from a street lamp shining on his silver blond head. The car drove away, and presently she heard Marilyn and Jim come up to their bedroom, slowly, talking in the desultory, intimate fashion of married people going sleepily and contentedly to bed. The old house was very quiet now . . . only the creaks of the woodwork, and then the melancholy sound of a tug hooting on the river. She went to sleep with a picture of Jim and Marilyn in the circle of lamplight, so close together in understanding, and at the same time she felt they were menaced, but by which or either of the two men she could not say.

In the morning sunlight the feeling of menace seemed absurd. She rose quickly, washed and dressed, and went down into the kitchen. She raked and refuelled the boiler, set on the kettle for tea, laid a clean cloth and started to set the children's breakfasts. She would try to get them washed and dressed and breakfasted without disturbing Marilyn and Jim. Twenty minutes later as she sat at the kitchen table with them, helping the twins to guide their egg-spoons—for all the world like twin nestlings opening their mouths for worms, listening to Jose worrying importantly as to whether she should spend the morning writing a book or painting a picture, Jean felt with a little quirk of laughter as though she had come home. Here everything she could do needed to be done. She felt curiously peaceful and at home. She glanced round the big kitchen, listening with half an ear to Jose's ambitions. One of the first things she would do would be to distemper the kitchen.

It was nearly a month before Jean got round to the kitchen.

By then a whole lot of things had happened, she had found a morning school for Jose, and she had found Dilly Brakes.

The school was fairly easy to organise—Jim did not need the car until midday when his morning surgery finished, so she put all the children into it, took Jose to school, and did the shopping, but even then until Dilly came the house was more than she could cope with. The meals and the organisation alone taxed her to full capacity, without thinking of the real hard chores. Then one day of particular confusion, when the telephone had scarcely been quiet, with patients calling Jim, and Lowitz's office calling Marilyn, when a line of washing had broken and everything had to be rinsed again, when Jose had fallen and cut her knee, and the twins, those contented angels, had had one of their rare and curiously savage disagreements over the ownership of a dilapidated and long-forgotten rag doll, Jim produced Dilly.

The house was quiet at last, and they sat after supper together in the drawing-room over their coffee. They had supper late, after the surgery had closed. Marilyn, who had spent the entire day at the studio being fitted with the extravagant satins and brocades she was to wear in the film, was lying on the sofa wrapped in a long woollen gown of a soft parma violet colour. The little coffee table, its silver and porcelain shining, stood near her. Jim stretched his thin length in a chair, and Jean sat in the window-seat, her favourite place, where she could look out at the river.

"How lovely the room looks," Marilyn said, "and how quiet it is. It's a luxury being tired since you came, Jean."

Jean did not answer, she was tired too, more tired than she had imagined possible, too tired to enjoy relaxing. It had been an effort to go up and change her overall for a dress before supper. They had been trying to get some help in the house for her, but living in the middle of a factory district it was difficult. There was nothing to keep her, nothing to prevent her giving her notice, yet curiously she did not even think of it. As though Riverhouse was some sort of going concern in which she had invested some capital.

"I think," said Jim suddenly, "I've found someone to do the cleaning, Jean."

Jean rose and went over to the sofa, moving Marilyn's slim legs to make room for herself, and holding out her coffee cup to be refilled.

"I'm afraid she's not quite normal," he continued in his consulting-room manner.

"No one who wanted to work here could be," said Jean, and Marilyn gave a little spurt of laughter. "No offence meant, of course."

"Tell us about this prodigy," said Marilyn.

"Her mother is a patient of mine. She has a large, aggressive, bright and ambitious family who are all getting on. All except Dilly, who is soft."

"But can she scrub?" asked Jean.

"Apparently she is a very good cleaner. According to her mother she has had very good jobs, and excellent references for her work, but she can't keep a job."

"Why?"

"Because she steals."

There was a little silence, then Marilyn said loftily: "Well, I suppose we could lock up the crown jewels—and everything else for that matter."

"Impossible in this house. No one would find anything, and you'd lose the keys."

"You could have a duplicate set," said Marilyn, as though she had pulled a rabbit out of a hat.

"Yes, dear, but you'd borrow them and lose them too," Jean said sweetly. "I'm afraid it's no go, Jim. I'll have to struggle on for a bit until we find someone reliable."

"It's not only you," said Jim slowly. "It's Dilly herself. I'd like to have her—for her own sake. I thought we might be able to help her." He looked up with swift appeal. "I think she only steals like unhappy children do . . . because all her brothers and sisters are so clever, and Mum and Dad are so proud of them all, and everyone thinks her such a fool. Perhaps if she could keep a job for a bit, it might help her. She's not an imbecile . . . in fact, she's quite a nice-looking kid. She just doesn't react quickly, that's all."

Jean glanced at Marilyn, and their eyes met with complete understanding. They both knew the idea was crazy, but neither of them could have denied Jim, particularly his wife,

for she knew what it was to be young and friendless and misunderstood.

"Well," she said, "I could have easily been a delinquent child myself if Jean had not been my friend and I hadn't married you, darling. It's up to Jean, of course, she's the kitchen queen. If she is willing to give the girl a trial, why should I mind?"

"If the cat next door has kittens, we find them homes," said Jean, "if the Vicar wants to give a jumble sale, we offer the garden and let the congregation trample on Jim's daphniums. What are we taking on now?" She put her hand out quickly and patted Jim's arm. "Okay, okay . . . I'm only teasing. I'll give Dilly a trial."

Dilly came the following day, a big, dark girl, untidy, with rough hair pushed unkemptly into a net, and large, brown, sullen eyes. She hardly ever spoke. She scrubbed through the kitchen, the passage and the surgery with a hospital thoroughness. The house began to gleam in full glory now, step and brasses, windows and polished floors. A week went by uneventfully, and then on the Saturday Dilly didn't come. Dusting the drawing-room, Jean found a glass paper-weight missing, a pretty thing, the depth of its glass like translucent green water in which bloomed silvery-white leaves and blossoms of blown glass. She told Marilyn, who was reading her script to a pop-eyed Jose in the garden.

"Go on, Mummy, please. What happens after he draws you into his arms?"

"Oh . . . a cut . . ." Marilyn said hurriedly. "What is it, Jean? You look sad."

Jean told her. "I feel so mad," she said, "as though I've let Jim down. I ought to have watched her, I suppose, but I wanted her to like it here. She worries me. She looks at one like a circus animal that has been trained cruelly and will never trust a human being again." She looked quickly at Marilyn. "What shall we do? Shall we tell Jim?"

Marilyn hesitated. "Perhaps if we don't say anything, she'll put it back."

"Perhaps—or perhaps she'll go on taking more and more things assuming we don't mind."

"How do you feel about it, Jean?" asked Marilyn

quickly. "You have to cope with her. Personally, with the calm we've had lately, I don't mind losing a few paper-weights. Look, tell me exactly what you think. I know what Jim thinks about it—he looks on her as a patient, and this is a sort of exercise cure. But if you can't take it, it can't go on."

Jean said: "The losses will be yours not mine, she's a fine worker, and I rather—well, I rather like her, Marilyn. She's hardly said anything to me but 'yes'm' when I've asked her to do something, but——"

"I like Dilly," announced Jose with sudden imperiousness. "She lets me go down the coal cellar with her, and I'm not frightened of it any more."

Jean met Marilyn's eyes. "You see?" she said. She had been trying to explain what she thought of the broad-shouldered, sulky-eyed, silent Dilly. A strength and a warmth somewhere, untapped, and at her home unrecognised.

Jim came from the house on his way to the garage to make some afternoon calls, and with his swift comprehension caught their glances, heard Jose's and Jean's words. His face warmed suddenly.

"Dilly's not simple-minded," he said. "She'll always be one of those simple, rather slow women, but not ignorant. She works so well and thoroughly, and she's so gentle with small creatures. If I could only release her from this resentment she has against people who get on and think quickly, of her clever family."

Release her? Then what? Would one day she make a fine strong simple man a fine wife, a woman who would grow to middle-age with a clutter of children about her knees? She might not produce geniuses, but she would produce strong bodies and steady, quiet enduring nerves. If only one could release her. Jean said quickly: "Dilly hasn't been to-day, Jim. Will you drop me at her place? I have to do some shopping, anyway, and I'll make inquiries before I go on to the shops."

Jim's face tautened with disappointment. "She's taken something?"

"Oh, it's nothing. . . ."

"It's only an old . . ." Marilyn and Jean spoke together,

and stopped. He stood silently, and then made a little gesture of resignation. "I can't ask you to carry on, Jean, if you don't feel like it. You've enough to do."

"Let's give it a time limit—like any other cure," said Jean quickly. "Let's give it a year. She's helping us . . . let's see if we can help her."

Jim looked up and smiled his sweet smile, and Marilyn went across to him, brushing the hair from his forehead and saying in a voice that made the words an endearment: "You do want a haircut, angel."

"Thanks, Jean," Jim said. "I'll run you down to Dilly's."

"I'll get my coat while you take the car out," said Jean. The two girls stood watching his tall thin figure go through the gate where the roped wisteria twined. As Jean turned she caught a wistful, almost wan look on Marilyn's face. She stood very still, her black hair tossed back from her face, her hands clutched tightly.

"I wish I was different," she said unexpectedly. "I wish I was good like Jim—and you." Jean stared, and then laughed, and Marilyn blazed round on her in a sudden spurt of temper.

"Don't laugh," she said. "It's true. Jim would be better with someone like you. Someone who would help him instead of being personally ambitious. It could have easily been you instead of me he met when we were at school."

Something in her voice raised a panic in Jose's heart. She threw her arms round Marilyn and buried her face against her. "Mummy, Mummy, don't be sad. Don't be cross. Don't go away!"

Marilyn relaxed, put her arms about Jose, bent and kissed the top of her dark head. "Stop it, silly. I'm in a mood, that's all."

Jose lifted tear-filled eyes. "Then I wish you wouldn't be. It's frightening."

Marilyn looked up at Jean over the little girl's head, hating herself for upsetting Jose, knowing that the child's nervousness was often her fault. "You see?" she said.

Jean still laughed, but there was an edge of seriousness in her mocking voice. "If people only fell in love with their

own sort of people, the world would be a pretty peculiar place. You really are a goose, Marilyn ! ”

But Marilyn was bending to Jose, charming away her fears and tears. “ Let’s go to the sand-pit and play with the twins until I have to get ready.”

Jean paused. “ You won’t be in to dinner ? ”

Marilyn’s eyes as she looked up asked a silent apology for her outburst. She had beautiful, expressive eyes, so dark a blue that they photographed black. “ I’m going to Saxelby’s party. He’s inviting some press people and theatre people he thinks it’s important for me to meet.”

She paused and said, almost as if she had guessed Jean’s thoughts : “ I asked Jim, but the surgery doesn’t finish until eight . . . or nine sometimes. He’s too tired then to dress and come out to hear a lot of cinema people talk shop. . . .” But the apology had gone from those speaking eyes again, they were saying, “ You see ? ” just as she had said after her first outburst that had frightened Jose.

Jean felt a queer little clutch at her heart, but she only said : “ I’ll leave some chocolate in the thermos for you in the drawing-room.” She wanted to say, “ Don’t be late.” She wanted Marilyn to come home before Jim was too weary to wait any longer for her, too tired to show interest in her talk of the famous, the fashionable, and the notorious. It happened quite often now. The old house so quiet that the creaking wood and the river sounds seemed enormous. Even the pubs would be closed and no drunken footsteps or raucous voices would go past towards the massed rows of smoke-begrimed slum dwellings that lay across the road. And then when the night was quietest the smooth cars would sweep round and halt, and light voices would laugh and talk, as Marilyn came home. Jean turned towards the kitchen, where her loose tweed shopping coat was hung.

It was not her business what Marilyn did. Marilyn was her friend and employer, she was beautiful, talented and ambitious and she had the right to try to use her talent. But that love of hers and Jim’s was so precious and rare that Jean could not bear it even to be breathed on by danger . . . like washing the Georgian cut-glass goblets from the cabinet.

Rare and lovely were the things Jean loved to care for, and this marriage between her friends seemed one of them.

Jim dropped her outside Dilly's, and she knocked, and a bright aggressive young man with his sleeves rolled up, and a patched bicycle inner tube in his hands, opened the door. One of the bright brothers, she decided.

"I'm Miss Dundass, from Dr. Grayson's. Is Dilly all right? She didn't come to work this morning."

He shrugged. "Hmm, at it again, I suppose." And as Jean merely looked inquiring, went on: "Missed anything?"

Jean managed to look completely blank. "I don't understand. We've missed Dilly of course. Is she in?"

"Yeh, she's in." He went into the interior of the house, calling: "Hi, dopey!"

Dilly came to the door slowly, and her big tall body shrank against the wall as she passed her short, brisk, busy brother. He jerked his head towards Jean and said, not unkindly: "What yer bin' pinching now?"

Dilly looked up at Jean with a sullen expressionless gaze.

"Haven't you been well?" Jean said quietly. "We were worried when you didn't turn up this morning."

Dilly waited, as though expecting something else. Then said: "I couldn't come. Mum wanted me."

Mrs. Brakes suddenly appeared in the hall, small, brisk and busy as her son, wiping her rough hands on her apron. She heard Dilly's words.

"What a lie! I never wanted you. I said if you didn't go to work you could 'elp me, but I never told you to stay away. What's she been up to, miss? Not pinching? Not in the doctor's 'ouse? Not after 'im being so kind? Never was an 'ard-working woman cursed with such a child. . ."

"Dilly," said Jean in the midst of this tirade, "we all hope you'll be coming back. The hall didn't get scrubbed this morning, and the brasses were left. Jose missed you too, she likes going down the cellar."

A little light, like a smile, broke far away behind Dilly's eyes. "She says it's a giant's cave." The smile quickened. "She's a lad! The things she says!"

"I'll expect you back to-morrow, then," said Jean.

But it wasn't until she heard the back door click next morning, as she was getting the breakfast, and Dilly came in and hung up her shabby coat without a word, that she felt any sense of victory . . . not for herself, but for all of them, for Riverhouse, even if she did not bring back the paper-weight. Dilly put on her apron, rolled up her sleeves, filled the bucket and went out to scrub the front steps and the hall. Presently Jose slid down the banisters and joined her, sitting on her back, and saying : " Let's pretend you're an elephant, Dilly, and I'm a gorgeous maharanee from the far and mysterious East . . ." Jose's conversation was strongly influenced by film captions. She heard them both talking and laughing as Dilly worked, and marvelled that the silent, sullen girl, who hardly spoke to any other member of the family, should hold such long and, apparently for both of them, entrancing conversations with the child.

Summer had come, as it sometimes does in England, all in a rush, just as everyone had decided there would be no summer at all, but only a prolonged April, gusty and blowy, with sharp slanting showers of rain and occasional brilliant days. But it was hot with the heat that edges tempers and tires feet, and Marilyn had been standing for two hours now, being fitted and draped in satins and velvets over the unwieldy hooped petticoat fastened round her slim waist. She was surrounded by demons. There was a fitter, a tall woman in black, with those lizard-black French eyes, with her hair scraped back and her mouthful of pins, tireless and impervious to Marilyn's occasional plea to be allowed to sit down. " Time is short, Madame," was her one reply, and when Marilyn occasionally struck and sat down she regarded her with faintly concealed scorn, and turning to the designer and his companion, would burst into a machine-gun fire of French, her flying hands and scornful shoulders saying only too plainly that in her opinion all actresses were lilies of the field who had never known what it was to do a hard day's work, like some poor wage slaves she could mention.

The designer, contrary to general ideas on designers, was a large tweedy young man, with a pipe and bristling beard. He had with him a sheaf of his excellent designs, he could draw

like an angel, and swear like a stevedore when the dressmaker failed to make them come to life. He was the worst demon, because he was completely unaware of Marilyn as a person when he was working. He thought she was lovely, he thought the period would suit her, and he was completely lost in creating the picture in his mind. He had in tow a minor demon, a thin, scholarly middle-aged man, who peered at her all the time through pebble-glasses, who was apparently an authority on the period, and who always seemed to find some anachronistic shoe buckle, ribbon or curl, whereupon an enormous argument would immediately arise as to what was historically, artistically and fashionably permissible, while Marilyn shifted wearily from one foot to the other, pushed back her heavy dark hair, and looked enviously at the carefree sparrows cavorting on a neighbouring roof.

This morning Johnny had been ill. She had seen it the minute she went in to the twin's bedroom to help them dress. Jim had taken his temperature and said he must stay in bed, and kissed her and told her not to worry--the temperature was not very high and it was too early to tell what was wrong with him. It might be just a summer cold, although there was measles about. She had this fitting at ten-thirty and would have liked to cancel it and stay with Johnny, particularly as Jim had told them to keep Jane and Jose away, as it might be something infectious. Jose had gone off to school, but Jane, without her twin and partner, hung about the stairs in a pathetic childish resentment at the unexpected and inexplicable separation, and refused to be comforted.

Jim had gone into his morning surgery, and Marilyn had dressed and hung about, and finally went in to Jean in the kitchen. It was Thursday, usually a day of comparative freedom, for it was Jim's half-day and he often took Marilyn and the children out. With this in mind, Jean had stripped the kitchen for distempering, and as there was only a cold lunch and both Marilyn and Jose would be out, she had decided to wash the walls down as she had arranged. In blue dungarees, her rusty hair tied under a scarf, she was a businesslike figure. She looked down from her ladder as Marilyn opened the door, a lovely summery figure in her lavender taffeta and big grey straw hat with sprigs of

lavender and little red roses decorating the brim. She lowered her brush and smiled inquiringly, waiting for instructions for the day.

Marilyn came forward gingerly, for the red brick floor was puddled with water from the walls. Jane came behind her, grizzling. She and Johnny were so united that they never needed amusing, and the sudden realisation that she could disturb the household by her sorrow, and worry her beautiful and important mother, had rather gone to her head.

"Jean, do you think I ought to stay? I don't like leaving Johnny . . . especially when you've so much to do to-day."

Jean sat on the top of the ladder. "I haven't got too much, really, Marilyn. I picked on to-day for the distemper-ing because there was so little to do. Johnny's asleep now. I promise Dilly or I will go up every half-hour, and you can ring at lunch time to see how he is."

"And there's Jany." Marilyn bent and gathered up her daughter against her soft, rustling taffeta, perfumed breast, and Jany, who had not Jose's extravagant devotion to her mother, and whose affection was usually demonstrated by a rough and rare bear hug, was touched with a sense of drama, and opening her mouth emitted a long low wail of despair. "She is so lonely without her Johnny, aren't you, darling?" Jany's voice took on a more piercing note. "Poor pet, shall Mummy stay with you?" She looked up at Jean. "You see, Jean? Lowitz will be mad, because he wants to start the exterior shooting while this weather lasts . . . but I think I'll 'phone and cancel this fitting until to-morrow. Johnny may be better by then."

Jean came down the steps and stretched out her arms for Jany, who went into them without a murmur of protest. "Jany's going to help me distemper, aren't you, chick? We're going to slosh distemper about all over the place."

Jany stopped crying, and an expression of pleased interest came into her round, dark, long-lashed eyes. She patted Jean's cheek with a sticky hand and said approvingly: "Nice, dear, darling, angel Jeany."

Jean laughed and winked at Marilyn. "Cupboard love," she said. "Look, darling, you hired me to take on these things for you, so you could be free for your work . . . don't

go and annoy Lowitz and the designer now, just after you've landed this wonderful part. I promise you faithfully I'll take the greatest care of Johnny. And Jim's going to take Jose and Jany to the Zoo this afternoon if Johnny's all right, so I shall manage perfectly."

Marilyn hesitated. She knew it was the sensible thing to do, and yet she hesitated. Then she said: "All right. I'll telephone you about one . . . you'll not pretend he's better if he isn't?"

"Of course not."

"All right, bless you, Jean."

She went out of the front door, where the taxi Jean had telephoned for was waiting, with mixed emotions. She puzzled over her feelings all the way to the dressmaker's and decided that she wished they could not so obviously do without her. All of them, except perhaps Jose, who would die without her mother . . . and Jim. She thought of Jim, his preoccupation with his work, and lately, since Jean had been with them, his alertness and pleasure in it—the thin shadows beginning to disappear in his cheeks, and only tired after his long and arduous day.

She scowled at the sunny river as the taxi passed over the Thames. "A real wife would have done all the things Jean does for him, I suppose," she thought unreasonably; "but when he married me he knew what I was like, and what I wanted to do . . . that was the arrangement . . . and . . ." she stopped, thinking of Jim's kiss this morning when she had worried about John, and her blood tingled again with the memory. She was talking nonsense because she was worried. She and Jim were as much in love as they had been when she had climbed over the school wall to run away with him. Darling Jim.

She was thinking of him when the designer's voice roused her. "With the nineteenth century one is so tied. In the seventeenth and eighteenth there's more scope. I mean, when the old men were still in full-skirted coats and brocades, the young ones were following the Incroyables, the middle-aged women were in hoops, and the girls in clinging chiffons . . . but Victoria's women are more or less the same . . . curls, laced bodices, flowered bonnets, thickly-gathered skirts,

elastic-sided shoes . . . you can't play around with the outline. It's all the same. Colour is the thing, and sumptuous materials. . . . I was looking at the Winterhalters, and I think we haven't quite got the idea of colour . . . the . . ."

"Mr. Terrell," said Marilyn irritably. After all, she was a rising star, and had the right to be noticed by someone. "I have tried the last dress. Surely I can go now?"

Mr. Terrell rushed forward and helped her off the little stand, apologised profusely, and generally gave her the flattery and attention he felt necessary to soothe her fraying temper. He was really a very nice young man when he was not working. Marilyn went into the dressing-room and changed into her own clothes, smoothed her hair, ruffled by taking heavy-skirted gowns over her head, powdered, lipsticked, put on her big hat and sallied out to the telephone.

"How's Johnny?"

It was Jean who replied. "Oh, he's fine, Marilyn. His temperature's gone down and he's just had some orange juice and a cracker, and is fast asleep. He only wanted fish and chips for lunch!"

Marilyn laughed in relief. "The little blighter!"

"Yes. Jim says it's just a cold, and to keep him in bed and on light food to-day. He should be up to-morrow."

"Oh, I am glad. I'll go and have some lunch myself now. Good-bye, Jean, dear, and thanks. . . . I won't be late this evening."

She felt as though a load had slipped from her shoulders. Illness was something she hated and feared and if anyone she cared for was even the slightest bit ill, it made her afraid and depressed. All the tiredness left her, and she ran down the wide marble steps into the square with the lightness of a child let out of school. . . . An enormous shining Packard, like a film cartoon monster of pale grey and shining chromium, stood at the kerb. She stopped, recognising it, and Lance Saxelby rose from the driving seat and came across the pavement to meet her, handsome and smiling, debonair, the sunlight shining on his wheat-coloured hair.

"How did you know I was here?"

"My spies told me. I've been waiting an hour to take you out to lunch."

"I'm ravenous . . . and so happy."

"Good, hop in." He helped her in before getting back himself, and, starting up the car, drove towards Berkeley Square. "What has made you so happy?"

"Oh, Johnny was ill this morning, and I just 'phoned and Jean says he's better."

"Oh, yes. Dr. Jim's charming and efficient domestic wife," he said, smiling. She frowned.

"That old joke! It bores me. Besides, I don't like it. I'm Jim's wife."

"Are you?" He took his gaze from the road for a minute, looking at her, the lovely, dark, rebellious face framed by the big hat. She was holding the brim with both hands, but the draught still whipped black elf locks across her face, across his lips as he turned to look at her. A little cold fire kindled in his blue eyes.

"I wish you'd forget it sometimes," he said teasingly. "It doesn't suit you a bit to be a responsible wife and mother. . . . It's Miss Dundas's *genre*, obviously. But not yours."

"What is mine?" she said thoughtlessly, her eyes on the traffic, still too happy at Johnny's recovery to think of anything else.

"An actress, an artist, and an enchantress," he said.

Marilyn laughed—she was an adept at this game. If it amused Lance to pretend he was in love with her, it would amuse her too, over lunch. She looked at him with her laughing, languorous dark-blue eyes, and at the undisguised, naked desire in his look the smile died on her lips and her heart hurried, as though with fear.

"Please don't talk nonsense, Lance," she said lightly; "you'll put me off my lunch."

The luncheon at Riverhouse was an extremely cheerful affair. Jean untied her head from its scarf, slipped a coat over her distemper-splashed dungarees and took the car to get Jose from school. When she came back, Jim had finished his surgery and gone up to see the patient, whose temperature was normal and who was demanding food, toys and Jany in no uncertain terms.

Jim came running downstairs just as Jean and Jose came in.

"How's the patient?"

"He's okay. It's nothing but a summer cold. We'll keep him where he is to-day, and there's no reason why Jane shouldn't stay up with him. They can cut up and crayon, or something."

"Daddy"—Jose clasped her hands suddenly—"does that mean you and I can go out *alone*?"

"It does—unless Jean feels we should stay and help her with the distempering."

"Oh, no . . ." she said quickly, seeing the anxious look on Jose's face, "I've almost done. I shan't be disturbed, because Dilly's coming back after lunch. She asked if she might sit with John, so she can keep an eye on them both."

Jim turned to his eldest daughter, and said with grave courtesy: "And what would you like to do?"

Jose clasped her hands and danced with excitement, her pupils widened, just like Marilyn's, so that her dark-blue eyes looked almost black. Jean saw the swift sweet tenderness rise in Jim's eyes, and knew he had thought exactly as she had thought. His hand went out quickly to Jose, and she hung on to it, still jumping, her thick short hair flying.

"I don't know what to do. May I put on my new dress after lunch, the one Muminy bought me and it cost pounds? Not the Zoo, it's only for kids."

"It's a bit juvenile," Jim agreed. "How about the ballet?"

"Oh!" Jose was speechless.

"Well, I'll see if I can get some seats. But you must eat your lunch."

The lunch, which Jean had set in the little dining-room near the kitchen, was soup, egg mayonnaise, and a fruit pie, most of which she had prepared the day before. It was a dear little room, looking over the garden, with two beautiful shell cupboards set in the panelling. It was one of the few rooms that had recently been decorated, and the panelling was pale grey, the alcoves lined with turquoise paint. The furniture was Regency, delicate fine mahogany with brass

inlays, and Jean had collected and washed all the many bits of fine china in the house and made a display in the blue alcoves. Filled with Staffordshire, Chelsea and Spode, the alcoves looked like two bright bouquets on each side of the severe Adam fireplace. She superintended lunch, taking Johnny some orange juice and biscuits on a tray. He demanded to know what they were having, evidently with the idea of self-torture, now his appetite had returned. She said: "Fried frogs' legs and black beetles!" Which he seemed to think the extreme perfection of wit, and rolled with his fat legs in the air, enjoying the joke.

Jim got the seats, lunch was eaten with the silent abstraction due to the anticipation of greater things to come, and Jean took the children upstairs, while Dilly cleared away and washed up. She put Jany down to sleep in her bed next to Johnny's, hearing her remark profoundly: "I'm glad you didn't die this morning, John, because I wouldn't have had no person to play wiv."

Jose she washed, brushed, attired in the exquisitely tucked and smocked rose-coloured shantung which Marilyn had just bought for her. All the children's clothes had needed attention, and Jean had spent afternoons at the stores—buying sturdy sandals, plain ginghams, underwear and mackintoshes, but watching Jose's face as she looked at herself in the rose-coloured silk, she knew it would colour every memory of Marilyn as long as the child lived. She would never remember the worn-out shoes and the outgrown shabby little coat. She would say: "My mother was the most beautiful person, and always bought me the most beautiful clothes." And she would be right. Because everything Marilyn bothered to do was touched with colour, beauty and graciousness, and it was right that these things should be remembered. She watched Jim and Marilyn depart down the wide shallow steps; the river scene, and the trees on the embankment opposite making a charming background to the picture—Jose so grown up and proud in her new dress.

She closed the door, and went into the kitchen, and helped Dilly finish the dishes. A chorus of commanding shouts from upstairs warned them that the twins were awake, so

Dilly took up some embroidery she was doing and went upstairs. She did very beautiful embroidery, her big hands were steady and curiously skilful. Her only explanation of this gift was a slow, defensive "I likes pretty things."

The shouts died out as Dilly went upstairs, and with a sigh of relief Jean went back into the kitchen, tied up her hair, put on her dungarees, watered down the pale mush-roomy pink distemper with which she was doing the walls, climbed up on her trestle and began happily sloshing away. If she could do the main walls to-day, she and Jim and Marilyn might get the paintwork done over the week-end. The afternoon went by quickly, the shadows of the garden trees moving slowly across the walls that were changing to a pale pinkish creamy colour. From beneath the dust cover over the dresser, her little radio moved from programme to programme, Mendelssohn's violin concerto, "How to make a Rotting Heap and the Use of Garden Manures," and a bright little political chat about "Women's Place in Local Government." By this time Jean had got to the top corner of the final wall—there was a gramophone programme of a crooner, whose long-drawn-out declarations of passion and sentiment were making her wonder whether she would have to get down from the trestle to turn him off before she had finished the corner, when the door-bell rang. She slapped her brushful on the wall, worked it on, climbed nimbly down and went to the front door, expecting the postman, or a patient with some message for the doctor.

Thin and dark, tailored to a point of elegance, Phillip Lowitz stood on the doorstep. He swept off his soft dark hat and Jean cast her mind frantically back over Marilyn's engagement book. She was sure there was no appointment with Lowitz to-day. He stood silently for a moment, looking at the unconventional figure before him. The dungarees splashed with distemper, the pinky-white smear on her nose, the wide grey eyes gazing at him with complete astonishment. Then he smiled, and Jean thought suddenly: "I've never seen him smile before," and was surprised how much younger he looked when the lines of pain and of cynicism and the defensive little frown had vanished.

He said: "You weren't expecting me?"

"I'm afraid not. . . ." She made a vague gesture towards the dungarees. "I was decorating the kitchen."

"I'd arranged to come and go through the script with Miss Falaise. . . ."

"Miss Falaise . . . oh, you mean Marilyn." For a moment she had forgotten Marilyn's maiden and professional name. "Well, she should be back by now . . . she went to a fitting this morning, but I was expecting her back. Won't you come in?"

He limped across the threshold into the cool, marble-tiled hall. The smile gone, he looked tired and hot, and she said impulsively: "Wouldn't you like to wait in the garden? It's pleasant there. Do you mind coming through the kitchen? It's the quickest way." He followed her slowly, waiting while she stopped and lifted the dust cover on the dresser, looking for her little diamond watch to see the time. Marilyn had obviously forgotten all about this appointment. "Where would be the likeliest place to find her now? I'll try and get her on the 'phone if you'll wait; perhaps you would like some tea."

"Thank you. . . ." He went to the open garden door. "I should try the Peacock Club, she's often there with Saxelby in the afternoon."

With Saxelby? She looked up. Truly Saxelby was going to be the leading man, but why should Marilyn . . . ? She had a sudden memory of the magnificent, white-blond young man, with the pale eyes that sought for admiration in every woman's face . . . and began to search hurriedly and irritably along the dresser. The watch was not there—and no one but Dolly had been in the kitchen.

"Oh, dear." Her eyes filled with exasperated tears. Everything was suddenly horrible. Phillip Lowitz came back to her side, quickly and quietly. "What's the matter?" he asked gently. "Is anything wrong? Have you lost something? Can I help?"

CHAPTER 3

FOR A BRIEF moment Jean completely forgot that Phillip Lowitz was anyone especially important, and that Marilyn had apparently forgotten her engagement with him. The watch was gone, and she knew it had been there. It was a valuable little thing and pretty, a treasure of hers because it had been her parents' twenty-first birthday present, but it was not of that she thought. It was of Dilly, and of Jim. She had hoped so much the glass paper-weight had been the last of Dilly's thefts. She had hoped that asking her to come back, and the fact that she had come back and apparently settled down again so happily, had been the beginning of what Jim was working for . . . and this, this new theft, threw it all back to the start again. She stood there, rather absurd in her distemper-splashed dungarees, the white smear across her nose, searching along the dresser, tears of vexation filling her eyes.

Lowitz watched her curiously. Watching her at other times on his occasional visits, quietly moving about the house, keeping the life of Riverhouse moving on oiled wheels, she had seemed to him rather a reserved and distant person. Now, because she was tired, unnerved and upset, she suddenly appeared feminine, and somehow endearingly comical, and in her complete lack of self-consciousness so completely unlike the theatrical women he met in his life.

"What is it?" he asked again, gently. "Is there something wrong? Can I help?"

She sat down on the tall kitchen stool, where she sat at the sink for cleaning and paring vegetables, and the whole scene gave him a curious nostalgic feeling, like coming home after a long journey. His life for so long had been spent in lodgings and hotels, in film studios and theatres, in clubs and pubs . . . the life of a lonely, proud and ambitious man. Even now, his luxurious little town house by Regent's Park had nothing of a home about it. The big kitchen with the leafy light coming in took him back to a forgotten time, when

he had been a child in Poland, before his mother died—when he had been a small, lame boy whom she had loved more than the rest of her children, as though to compensate him for his twisted foot. When she had died his father had married again, a younger woman who had conscientiously taken him to doctors and specialists to try and get the foot cured . . . but she had been ashamed of the foot for all that, and she had made him ashamed of it too.

“What is it?” he said again, gently, and she looked up and told him about Dilly, very simply, voice and eyes full of distress.

“Why should it mean so much to you?” he asked.

“It means so much to Jim,” she said frankly.

“To—Marilyn’s husband?” he said lightly, and she looked up, a little puzzled by his voice, and, seeing her innocent surprise, he felt a little ashamed. But, “You like him very much?” he persisted.

“Of course,” she said at once. “Who could help it? He’s so good to everyone.”

“And is everyone good to him?”

She was still puzzled, resenting the light cynicism of his voice, the detached observance of the dark eyes, disliking him suddenly altogether. It was a feeling he was accustomed to arouse, and it did not surprise him. It was a feeling he often deliberately aroused.

She said indifferently: “I don’t know what you mean.”

“In my experience, the good people, the kind people, merely get themselves used . . . people take what they have to offer, and then leave them.”

“But that wouldn’t matter to Jim,” she said quickly, “if what they had taken was some use to them.”

“What about his wife?” he said, in that quiet, deadly, accentless voice of his . . . a polyglot, living his thirty-six years in a dozen countries, he had made several languages completely his own.

“Marilyn!”

“Yes. Supposing—merely hypothetically, that now she has a career of her own, money, success, admiration—supposing she should want her own life completely?”

Jean stared. She hated him. She did not want to talk to him about her friends. She hated him because he was probing a little private fear of her own.

"That's nonsense," she said indignantly. "They adore each other . . . besides"—she had a sudden flash of insight—"even if it could happen—which is impossible—nothing could take away what they *have* had, and that's something most people never know."

"You really believe that?"

"Why not? I don't talk just to impress people. I'm not a publicity expert!" she said crossly. "I don't know how this conversation started. Please go into the garden, and I'll bring you some tea, and telephone Marilyn."

He smiled, and said: "Thank you, but if you will make the appointment again, for to-morrow, I'll come then. . . ."

"You are sure?"

"Quite—at three o'clock to-morrow."

"I'll tell Mrs. Grayson." Something made her say the name a little defiantly, and she saw from the lift of his quick dark brows that he understood.

He limped down to the big limousine, and the chauffeur opened the door and stood deferentially waiting for him to enter.

"Home, sir?"

"Yes . . . no. First take me down Victoria Street, there are plenty of trinket shops down there, aren't there?"

He sat unseemingly, watching the panorama of factory building, tree, wharf and river pass, thinking of Jean, her comeliness, the bright defiant glance of her eyes, the red-headed swift anger that she controlled so well. He thought of her strong, firm hands and the house that gleamed to orderliness beneath them. Life too. She was not distressed about losing her watch, but because something she was trying to help straighten had gone all awry. The old rhyme came back to him:

"Farewell rewards and fairies,
Good housewives now may say;
For now foul sluts in dairies
May fare as well as they.

Though they sweep their hearths no less
Than maids were wont to do,
Yet who of late for cleanliness
Finds sixpence in her shoe ? ”

He smiled, and the sallow sardonic face became suddenly young and gay. He reached out his ebony cane with its elegant jade handle, and tapped the glass behind the chauffeur. Obediently the man drew the car to the curb outside a cheap jeweller's, the window filled with beads and glittering cheap jewellery.

“ We'll see,” he said to himself, “ if we can't put sixpence in her shoe.”

It was fairly late, about half-past five, when Phillip's chauffeur rang at the door of Riverhouse. Jean had taken tea up on a tray to the twins and Dilly, straightened the kitchen, put away her brushes and duster, weary but delighted at the warm rosy glow she had created there. She went up to her room and bathed and changed, hearing Jim and Jose come back, and Jose rush upstairs to give a vivid illustrated account of her glorious afternoon. She had an hour to herself before she went down to settle the children, put Jose to bed and lay the supper . . . and a whole evening before her which she had planned luxuriously with her feet up and her library book, but the thought of Dilly and the watch, and her disappointment, and the fact that she had to tell Jim, had spoiled everything. She put on a new print frock of a particularly lovely shade of pale pinky-lavender, and decided immediately it was a mistake, found herself for the first time looking at her face with a sort of disparagement, not liking the swinging, shining rusty hair, and the scattered golden freckles, and wishing with an unreasonable intensity that she had been clean and tidy and properly dressed when Lowitz had called. Almost at once she became very still, her hair-brush still in her hand, gazing sightlessly across the river, thinking of the strange man—the strange, lame, dark, fastidiously clean, quietly elegant man. Not very tall, not very strong, so very unapproachable, and yet that swift understanding—“ Can I help you ? ” and the voice that made you confide, give your confidences and petty worries,

only to find that you had admitted a cynic and a stranger.

The door-bell rang and she started, looked blankly for a moment at the brush in her hand, put it down and ran down the wide shallow stairs to see who was there. It was Lowitz's chauffeur. He had a box wrapped in tissue paper and, sheathed in cellophane, a wonderful posy, as near a mixed country posy as one might get in London—moss roses, scented stocks, mignonette, sweet peas. He handed them with a note, saying they were from Mr. Lowitz and required no answer. She carried them over to the big oak chest which served for a hall table, to put them down, thinking they were for Marilyn, and the colour rose in her cheeks when she saw that the note and the flowers were for her—the box for Dilly.

The flush faded, and a little frown rose between her brows. Hurriedly she tore open the note.

"It is some time since I was at Riverhouse, and you and Miss Brakes have wrought such a shining and wonderful change, I felt that I must show my appreciation." The rest was underlined. "Please don't refuse my flowers, otherwise Dilly, too, might refuse this *petit cadeau*—and then it would be impossible for me to put sixpence in her shoe."

She frowned. He talked in riddles. Sixpence? Her mind ran round over the implication as though she were solving a cross-word. Sixpence in her shoe? The faines' reward for the good housewife. She smiled, and then suddenly saw his intention, and her heart gave a little leap of hope. Dilly was coming downstairs, her hands in her apron pocket. Her heavy dark eyes rested warily on Jean, and she came slowly downstairs, sidling round Jean with a muttered "Good night, M' . . ." as though she were trying to make herself invisible. Jean swung round to her impulsively and she cowered back against the wall, as though she expected to be clouted across the head. Jean was still for a breathless minute, for a moment she, too, could feel that impatient hit across the face, the exasperated parent, the overworked and infuriated teacher that hit out at the creature that they couldn't alter, couldn't enlighten and couldn't understand. They struck out at their own failure in the puzzled, enduring eyes. . . . For a moment Jean knew what Dilly's childhood

had been, just as well as she knew her own calm and sheltered girlhood.

"Dilly," she said quickly, "look how exciting! Mr. Lowitz came this afternoon to see Mrs. Grayson; he's a very important cinema director, you know."

Dilly watched her, not quite understanding.

"He makes pictures," said Jean. "You know, like you see at the Regal. Well, he was so thrilled with the house that he's sent us each a present. Look, flowers for me, and this for you."

She put the parcel in Dilly's hands. Dilly stared at it, as though she imagined it would explode. Jean stood there, thinking for a moment that she would burst into tears. She said urgently: "Open it, Dilly, please. . . . I'm longing to see what he has sent you!"

With slow fingers Dilly undid the string, the fancy paper wrapping, the little bright gold and black box, the cotton-wool, and inside were some beads, bright, cut-glass beads, showy but not cheap, of a beautiful garnet red—a double row, glittering and shining in the sunlight.

"Oh, Dilly," said Jean truthfully, "how beautiful! How nice of him. And look at his card; he's signed it. 'To Miss Dilly Brakes, with my very best wishes.' That will make them sit up at home, Dilly! He's very important, you know. Are you happy?"

Dilly went over to a mirror on the wall, and very carefully fastened them round her neck. By some miracle of inspiration, Lowitz had picked on exactly the right colour for her. The glowing red seemed to lighten her dark, sullen youth. Or was it the change in her eyes as she looked at herself, fingering the beads slowly as she looked in the glass?

"They look wonderful, Dilly," said Jean. "Are you going to wear them home?"

Dilly suddenly spoke, the longest consecutive speech that Jean had ever heard her utter. "You bet I am," she said proudly. "This'll make them stare. Make them see that everyone doesn't think I'm such a dope." She walked out to the kitchen, with such dignity that Jean did not know whether to cry or laugh. She heard her get her coat, and the back door close behind her, but when she went into the

kitchen the little diamond watch was back on the dresser exactly where she had left it.

She picked it up. "Oh, goodness!" she said excitedly. "Oh . . . oh . . . my!" She heard Jose run down the stairs and out into the garden for a few minutes with her father before the surgery opened at six, and without another thought chased out after her.

"Oh, Jim," she cried, "you'll have to give up business, or take Phillip Lowitz as a partner. He's a miracle man . . . he called this afternoon, and— " She poured the whole story out in a rush, while Jose and Jim listened open-eyed. Jim smote his forehead with exasperation.

"A stranger and a layman puts his finger on the spot, and does the thing I should have thought of months ago. . . ."

"Isn't it wonderful?"

"Gorgeous, glorious, glory be!" shouted Jose, catching their excitement, and throwing out her hands to them. They both caught one, and there was a sort of excited, self-congratulatory, whirling-around hug taking place when Marilyn walked through into the garden, and stood watching them. In their unthinking exultation the three of them seemed so close together, her husband, Jean, and her child. She had been laughing at the things Lance had said, laughing when he insisted that she had little place in the life of Riverhouse, and what she had was gone now that Jean ruled here. She felt a little sharp pain of horror and fear in her heart and walked forward, saying in a voice she did not recognise as her own:

"What on earth is going on? What has happened? Why the celebration?"

Jose, turning her head, let go their hands and flew across to her, throwing her arms about her in fierce welcome. Marilyn pressed the dark little head closely against her. Here, at any rate, she was safe, here was one love that was completely hers.

Lowitz was going to shoot his film in two parts. The interiors "on the floor" at the World Wide Studios just outside London, and the exteriors abroad in France. He was taking his camera crew and the principals, and relying

upon engaging local talent for any extra work that might be necessary, particularly troupes of Breton singers and dancers for the fête scenes. He had discovered and hired an empty château on the south Brittany coast—a Second Empire museum piece, highly romantic, a mixture of Gothic towers and Baroque stonework which delighted Lowitz, who had already spent some weeks there, getting an idea of his camera angles, and steeping himself in the atmosphere of the place.

Jim was a great admirer of Lowitz—on the rare occasions when he made the effort to go to a film it was usually either a good foreign film or one of Phillip Lowitz's productions.

"He always realises that the settings are, or should be, a background. He doesn't kill his actors and destroy the atmosphere by overdoing everything—so many film producers must have twenty crystal chandeliers when one would be really effective. You're lucky to be making your first important film with him, darling."

Marilyn agreed. She was working hard these days, leaving the house at five o'clock to be at the studios, made up and dressed by eight. Jean worked the house like clock-work, so that the children would be settled, and the house quiet in the evening, and a meal ready for her. Marilyn would go up to say good night to the twins, and spend an hour with Jose, reading or talking, and the rest of the evening would stretch on the big settee before the fire, reading her script, or trying to relax, a difficult thing for Marilyn with her impulsive, imaginative, rather reckless nature, and wire-taut nerves.

"Yes, he's a queer fish," she said slowly. "He's extraordinarily sensitive to atmosphere, sometimes extraordinarily sympathetic, and yet he's got a tongue like a whip-lash, and can be very cruel!"

"To you?" Jim asked quickly.

"No." Her smile was swift and reassuring. "No, he's usually nice with me."

"I expect he realises that you're like the farmer in the Philpotts' play," said Jean.

"The one whom a little child could lead, but a regiment of soldiers couldn't drive? Hmmm. You know me pretty

well, don't you, Jean?" There was something in her voice that made Jean look up sharply, but Marilyn's eyes were masked by the heavy white lids. She looked very beautiful, wrapped in one of her long fine woollen gowns that she wore in the evenings at home. This was of oyster white, and had big carved buttons of silver and crimson glass. White gown and white face, and dark hair cloudy and beautiful about her shoulders. Jean's eyes went back to her knitting; it was a cardigan for one of the twins. The children were going to stay with Jim's mother shortly, in her house by the sea, and she was preparing one or two things for them.

"Why don't you let me do that, Jean," said Marilyn with sudden petulance. "After all, I'm sitting here all evening. There's no reason why I shouldn't do something for my children occasionally."

Jean looked up, her clear grey eyes bright with surprise.

"I'm sorry, Merry, it never occurred to me that you might want to."

"It never occurs to anyone that I might want to do something ordinary."

Jim lifted his long length out of his chair, went behind Marilyn and slid his thin strong hands down her face, lifting her chin, tilting her face up, smiling down at her.

"What's this exhibition of temperament about?"

"It's been a hellish day. I told you Lowitz was a pig."

"To you?"

"No, to Lance."

"Why must you want to be everything, angel?" said Jim.

"Aren't you content to be a fine actress, and a beautiful person . . . and my dear love?" He bent and kissed her forehead, just where the cloudy hair sprang in its clear vital line. For a moment they were oblivious of Jean, who sat smiling and delighted, the little stir of unease in her heart subsiding and melting into nothing.

"Whatever will Jean think of us?" said Marilyn, releasing her hands, taking out a handkerchief and wiping her eyes. "I *am* an idiot! Thank you, darling, and I'm sorry, Jean. I loathe knitting anyhow, it makes me squint."

They laughed, and Jim lit a cigarette, and sat down at the

foot of the couch, lifting Marilyn's bare, arched feet on to his knee.

"Perhaps Lowitz doesn't like Lance?" said Jean.

"Oh, how could anyone help liking him," said Marilyn indignantly. "He's so handsome, and attractive, and so easy to get on with. . . ." She looked at their faces, and said in astonishment: "Do you mean neither of you like him?"

"Well, I hardly know him," began Jean.

"I've only met the man once . . ." said Jim simultaneously. They both stopped and laughed, and the ease that had slipped over Marilyn's face disappeared. "Lance was right. They were alike, Jim and Jean, they were those quiet, sincere people, the sort of worth-while people whom everyone needs. They had the same likes, the same dislikes.

"What don't you like about him?" she said.

They stared at each other, and Jean said: "I don't like vain tom-cat men who expect every female to caterwaul after them."

"Since you ask me," said Jim, "I think he's a bit stupid."

"I like him very much," said Marilyn defiantly, "and I'm in a better position to judge him than you are."

"Well, I'm glad," said Jim reasonably; "since you have to work with him. It would be awful to have to gaze with daily adoration at a man who gave you the cold shudders."

In spite of herself, Marilyn laughed, and the tension relaxed again. She looked up and in the big mirror over the fireplace caught a picture of the three of them, Jim leaning back, placidly smoking, Jean frowning as she tried to listen to the conversation and count her stitches, herself in the long white gown, with the dusky flowing hair, and again the seeds that Lance had sown stirred and germinated in her mind. She was the exotic one, the one out of place in this comfortable domestic scene. She was the actress, the fly-by-night, the disturber. Jim's other wife. She tried to shut a lid on the stirring, irritating thoughts, reached out, and took a cigarette from the box. Jim lit it for her, surprised, because she did not smoke as a rule, but he made no comment, thinking that she was working at pressure, and was perhaps a little tired.

"How about bed, sweet, you have to be up early."

"A good idea." She rose, slowly, stretching her long slender body like a cat. "I still like Lance. You and Jean are completely sold on Phil Lowitz since he had that idea about Dilly."

"Well, it was rather wonderful. Here we were, seeing Dilly every day, understanding her trouble, and unable to do anything for her. In he walks, and in a flash does exactly the right thing."

Jean coloured, looking up eagerly, dropping her knitting into her lap. "She brought back the paper-weight, too. I found it in its place the other day, Merry. You see his idea, the reward, sixpence in her shoe, as he said. I'm careful now to tell her how nice everything she does is. She's changing completely, she even talks to me quite a bit."

"Well, go carefully," said Jim practically, "or she'll be getting conceited."

"Not Dilly," said Jean loyally. "She's too simple and kind. I'd like to thank him, some day . . ."

Marilyn linked her hand in Jim's and drifted towards the door. During these last fantastic weeks she had begun to hunger for these brief night hours, when she and Jim were really together, really married, the only place where she could exclude everyone and everything from their little world of tenderness and understanding and passion. No doubt had yet entered this final, private world. So long as that was untouched, she was safe.

"You're sure to be seeing him soon," she said vaguely to Jean. "You can thank him then. . . . Good night, Jeany . . ."

"Good night."

"Don't potter all night. . . ."

"Very good, mum." Marilyn grinned, and tossed a cushion at her as she and Jim went out. Jean sat for a moment, then rose and put her work away. She went into the kitchen, automatically locking the back door, setting the breakfast trays, worrying a little still about Marilyn's new strange, unpredictable moods of resentment, wondering if perhaps after all Marilyn had a divided heart . . . wanting the best of both worlds. In a vase on the great old-fashioned

dresser were a few sprigs of mignonette, the last of the cluster that Phil Lowitz had sent. They were dead now. Jean lifted them out and threw them away, with a little feeling of regret, but as she went to turn out the lights and go upstairs to bed, she noticed that their perfume still lingered very faintly on the air.

The summer was well advanced by the time Lowitz finished shooting the interior scenes and was ready to go across to Brittany on location. It was August, and the old garden at the back of Riverhouse was heavy with the scent of the great late blooming magnolia tree which grew up the house wall. The flowers were enormous, great white waxy green things, that opened their petals with a slow and luxurious abandon to the sun, and after a day or so bowed to crumpled ruin, but their perfume was strange and exotic, creeping into Marilyn's room as she lay in bed in the morning, waiting for Jean or Dilly to bring her tray, adding something to her restlessness and the curious fever in her blood.

She felt somehow explosive. She was a flirt, and always had been, but the relentless pressure of Saxelby's infatuation for her was beginning to wear her nerves to shreds. She was working hard, and working with him, closely every day. She knew his reputation was doubtful where women were concerned, but she knew now that though this feeling he had for her, this unashamed desire, might be just as brief as any of his other affairs, it was at the moment a real passion that gave him no peace. She had often acted love scenes before, and with attractive men, but now even before the camera crew, the paraphernalia of the studio, the watching eyes, the ministering hands that came out to powder one's face, smooth one's hair, or hand one a prop, even in this complete lack of privacy of film-making, she found that when Lance took her in his arms her blood beat in response to his overmastering passion, and she was afraid. She turned to Jim with a new yearning of tenderness and passion, which both intoxicated and worried him, for while his love for her responded eagerly to her beautiful abandonment, his doctor's eyes and brain saw the fear behind it, the unspoken longing

for some security. It distressed him, because that was the one thing he had been certain of in their marriage, that in marrying this brilliant, beautiful, absurd girl he had given her a sense of home, that where he was was rest and safety and love and understanding, and now somehow, and from somewhere that he did not know, this was being destroyed.

Once he spoke of it. "What are you afraid of, beloved?" Cradling the delicate head in the circle of his arm, and was startled by her swift shying away from the question, her denial that was almost defiance.

There was so little he could do, he saw her so little now, and there were so many other people claiming his time and his services. But the unrest spread through the house, unnamed and unrecognised, but still there. Jean was aware of it, and thought Marilyn was overworking. Jose, to whom any disturbance meant a threat to her adored mother, became naughty and tiresome, hanging about Marilyn when she was at home, clinging to her, doing silly spectacular tricks to gain her attention, hating her absent-mindedness and vague unseeing caresses, and even the impenetrable calm of the twins seemed affected, although perhaps that was the heat of the close London days. Love, she thought, could be a disturbing and painful thing, even that between a mother and child. The love between Marilyn and Jose was very deep and close, and yet now, with Marilyn so restless, so offhand and absent-minded, Jean wondered if Jose would be happier away from her.

Marilyn had a few days off before they went away to Brittany to shoot the exteriors. It was a hot summer morning, and Jean took the breakfast tray into her room. As she went through the hall the telephone rang. It was Lowitz for Marilyn, so she switched the call through to the bedroom before she went on upstairs, knocking at the door before she went in, and put the tray down on the bedside table. There was a glass of orange juice, and some scrambled eggs and mushrooms and coffee. For Marilyn and Jim's own private meals, she used the lovely old pink lustre china, and the tray looked attractive, laid with a spotless cloth of pale-green linen, and she had plucked one of the great magnolias and laid it in a shallow glass bowl. Jim, shaving,

was in the communicating bathroom, and the flat dirge of his morning song issued tunelessly forth. Marilyn lay in the big four-poster, with its delicate fluted posts and head panel of bright, blood-red damask. She made her usual effective picture in her lacy nightgown, her dusky hair soft upon the splendour of her white shoulders. Her dark eyes lifted expressionlessly as Jean set the tray down and sat down at the edge of the bed to look at the morning paper. Jean wore a pale-green overall which set off the shining bronze swing of her hair. To Marilyn she looked infuriatingly clean, calm and capable. She leaned back on her pillows, speaking to Lowitz.

"When?" she said. "To-morrow? . . . No, of course I'd love to. I'm not a bit tired. . . . All of us? . . . I'll see, half a minute." She put the mouthpiece of the telephone against the pillow and said: "Phil Lowitz wants to throw a party to-morrow--he wants us all to come. Do you want to, Jean?"

Jean's eyes widened with delight. "Me? Ooh, goodness, yes! Film stars and things?"

Marilyn laughed. Occasionally some remark of Jean's cut through her tension, and took them back to their girlhood, when a chance schoolroom remark could set them off giggling together for a whole afternoon.

"Jim," called Marilyn, "Phil Lowitz wants us all to go to a party to-morrow night."

Jim put his head round the door with a plaintive expression. Parties were not in his line. With his hair on end, and his chin covered with soap, he said: "Must I?"

Jean saw the sudden impatient glitter in Marilyn's eyes, and said quickly: "Oh, Jim, just this once. I'm going, and I shan't know anyone if you don't come."

"Will Dilly stay the night and listen to the 'phone?"

"I'm sure she will."

"After surgery?"

Jean glanced at Marilyn for confirmation, and Marilyn said airily: "We shall miss half of it. I'll get Lance to fetch Jean and me, and you come on as soon as you can."

She spoke to Lowitz again, laughing with him, making little private references which took her away from them

into the film world that they did not know. Inwardly she was raging. Jim did not want to go. He did not like parties. They had just two free weeks before she went to Brittany. Why did he not ask her to stay at home with him, and let Jean go to the wretched party? Parties were a treat for Jean, but not for her. And yet, at Jean's light request, Jim had agreed to go. Marilyn completely forgot her own swift disappointment at his protesting "Must I?" She did not realise how used Jean had become to her swiftly-fluctuating moods, and how she moved, a little precipitately sometimes, to keep the peace, to keep things running harmoniously. Marilyn was an actress, bones, blood, nerves—everything, and self-dramatisation was inbred in her, as it must be in any creative artist.

She laughed and chatted for a little while with Lowitz, but she was thinking savagely: "I'm nothing here any longer—since Jean came . . ." She did not say: "Since I persuaded Jean, very much against her will, to come." She thought: "Lance Saxelby is right, she is his wife. I'm . . . nothing but a mistress to him!" And for once did not realise the thought was absurd.

Lowitz, at the other end of the telephone, listened to her rattling on, and frowned a little. What on earth was biting her now? He had wanted her to relax and enjoy these few days. He had noticed her tension, and did not like it—and he knew about Saxelby, for nothing, no faint flair of temperament passed unnoticed on his set. He had thought it a good thing for the picture for Saxelby to be in love with her, and had not given it a second thought. He considered Lance a beautiful, superbly masculine ham. Ham, pure and unadulterated. A director could use him, could make something of him, for he was photogenic material, superbly graceful, but he was not an actor. But he had an enormous fan following, and Marilyn was a sensitive enough artist to carry the picture—and he had wanted that for her. Saxelby, he had thought cynically enough, could and did fall out of love just as easily as he fell in, and once the picture was finished, it would be someone else.

As he listened to Marilyn's chattering empty voice, so completely unlike herself, he was suddenly not so sure.

Little things, which he had dismissed lightly enough, suddenly took on a new significance.

He suddenly thought of Château Benodet, the great fantastic castle in its hills and gardens, set away from the world on the Breton coast, and the company isolated there for two weeks or more. He said suddenly: "Have you thought about Brittany? I suppose you want to stay at the hotel with the rest of the company?"

Marilyn said blankly: "I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, I'm staying at the hotel—it's a nice place for kids. Look, Marilyn, it's near the sea, and there'll be a day here and there when you have no work. Have you thought of bringing the family with you? The kids would enjoy it, and Jean would take care of them when you were working."

"No, I had not thought about it."

Marilyn hesitated. For the first time she realised that if she went away to Brittany she would be leaving Jim and Jean quite alone. For a moment Lance Saxelby's suggestions, and her own highly coloured imagination, curled round the thought, and then Jim came whistling out of the bathroom, and apparently with recollections of the ballet to which he had taken Jose, began balletically to leap about the big bedroom. His tall thin figure, miming the languorous poses of a ballerina, shook her into laughter, and as always with Marilyn, when she was amused she was sensible. It was all nonsense she had been thinking. It was this continual high emotional tension and pressure of work, and Lance Saxelby's persistent, tireless siege. She was getting nervous and imagining things. She was afraid, not of Lance so much as of herself. Since her marriage she had never met a man who could stir and fascinate her as he could. He seemed to have some power over her blood and imagination which attracted her, although she did not want it. She wanted to be safe, as she had always been. But if Jim and the kids and Jean came to France too? Her mind, always quick to make a picture, saw them all established at some small hotel, and her spare hours, when she was not on the set, spent blissfully with them all on the beach. Safe.

"Well, thanks awfully for mentioning it, Phil. We'll have a family conference and let you know." She put down

the receiver and threw the huge magnolia to Jim, who was now bowing and kissing his hands to imaginary applause.

"Jim, if your patients could see you now, they would lose all faith in you."

He put on his jacket and prepared to go down to the surgery, becoming, or so he said, "Once again the brilliant young surgeon, upon whose skill and scalpel a thousand lives depend."

"You've been going to the pictures too much," she said severely.

"That's a fine way of supporting your own industry," he said, kissing her. "See you later, darling."

"Jim"—her hand caught his lapel eagerly—"Jim, Phil had a wonderful idea. When we go to Brittany, why don't you take your holiday then? Then you'd all be over there, and when I wasn't working we could have a wonderful time."

He sat down on the bed, conscious again of a new eagerness about her that he could not understand—almost as though she were afraid of going alone.

"But you're going in about two weeks' time. I've arranged for a locum to take over here late in August for our family holiday. He's a good man, darling, and I'm lucky to get him."

Her wave of enthusiasm faltered. She looked at Jim intently. "Don't you—want to come with me?"

"I would love to come, but I can't. And, Merry, I can't really afford it just yet."

"I can."

He rose, a little stiffly, to his feet; all his gaiety had vanished. "I'm afraid that's the trouble. You're going to be able to afford a lot of things in the future that I just can't. That's something we haven't thought about, Merry."

"What does it matter?" she said quickly. "When I wasn't earning, I took whatever you could spare. What difference does it make now? We've never bothered about money before—it's always been ours, not yours or mine." She threw herself back on the pillow, her hands locked beneath her head, gazing moodily at the ceiling. "I don't think you want to go."

He turned away, a little impatiently. Jean had just taken the tray down, and now came back with the day's menus for Marilyn to see. She smiled at him, and he automatically smiled back, grateful for her cheerful, pleasant presence. He turned and met Marilyn's eyes.

"It's out of the question, dear. But you could take the children, and Jean, if you liked. They could have another holiday with me—with both of us—later on. Good-bye for now."

He went out, and Jean picked up the big magnolia and came to the bedside. "Here are the menus. I thought we'd have grilled sole. They're awfully good just now, and you like it, don't you?"

Marilyn rolled irritably on to her elbow. What would you like? We'll do as you like? Except when she really wanted something desperately important. Once she could do as she liked, because she mattered here. Now the whole day stretched emptily before her. Two months ago she would have been rushing frantically about trying to catch up with the household duties she had neglected while she had been working, and the children would be following her about like a restless little pack of hounds, clamouring for her attention. But to-day Jose was at school and the twins playing in their sand-pit. The house lay about her in perfect and beautiful order, tamed by Jean's talent and Dilly's willing service. Lance wanted her to go out with him this afternoon to a *matinée*, and afterwards to tea at his flat. She wanted to see the play, in which an actress of her acquaintance was giving a particularly brilliant performance. Afternoons, of course, were impossible for Jim—and perhaps he would not want to go, if he could. It seemed to her that if he really wanted to come with her, just as if he really wanted to come to Brittany, he could come. He could get another locum, not perhaps such a good man but someone who would do. She turned restlessly and said to Jean: "What are you going to do to-day?"

"Well," said Jean excitedly, "this afternoon I thought I'd go out and buy myself a new frock for the party. It's years since I bought an evening dress. I've always been too busy, and at college one didn't need anything spectacular.

But if I'm mixing with film stars I've got to look a bit dashing."

"Oh, yes, of course."

Marilyn's face fell. She had tried on and fitted and worn so many clothes during these past months that an afternoon among the gown shops was the last thing she wanted to do.

"What will you wear?" asked Jean.

"Oh, I don't know . . . the grey chiffon and the amethysts." The amethysts were an extravagance. She loved the purple stones and had bought herself a beautiful old-fashioned set with her first cheque from Lowitz's contract.

"You'll look gorgeous," said Jean. "But then you always do. Well, I must go and help Dilly with the work, and get the shopping done if I'm going to be free this afternoon. . . ."

She went off downstairs. It seemed to Marilyn that everyone but herself was busily and usefully occupied. When Lance Saxelby rang up later, she agreed to go out with him. She got up and took a long while dressing, going out after lunch looking exquisite in a black moiré suit with a chiffony-lacy white blouse, and a big black hat.

The following evening she dressed for the party, taking the usual professional interest in her appearance, but not, as Jean was, in a positive whirl of excitement.

She sat before the mirror, looking at herself, taking the amethysts out of their case, and linking the shining purple stones about her neck. As her fingers fastened on the clasp, she shivered suddenly, and rose, away from the mirror, the colour flooding her cheeks. Her shoulders went up, as though shrugging the thought away. A kiss? Good heavens, she was behaving like a sixteen-year-old. What was a kiss? She had kissed Lance Saxelby a hundred times a day on the set. Could she help it if the man lost his head and behaved like a fool? But her thin, fine hand went up irritably, rubbing at the base of her throat where his lips had fastened, so hungrily, so swiftly, taking her by surprise. For a moment she had been helpless in his arms. She would be glad when this film was finished. Lance was getting completely out of hand. She wished now she had decided to wait for Jim, and not asked Lance to drive her and Jean to Phil Lowitz's house.

There was a knock on the door, and a voice called excitedly : " May I come in ? " And upon her reply, there was a flash of white in the doorway and Jean came in, her eyes dancing with excitement, wearing her new dress. A dress of white chiffon, strapless, with a big swirling skirt, a trail of green ivy over one bare shoulder, down across the bodice almost to the hem.

" Well ? " asked Jean. " What do you think of me ? "

For a moment Marilyn did not speak, then she said gravely : " You look quite lovely."

She had a feeling almost of trespass, as though Jean had suddenly stepped into her own private territory. She knew Jean so well, was so used to seeing her about the house in her simple frocks and overalls. A nice-looking, well-bred girl, well groomed and pleasant, attractive, with her grey eyes and swinging, shinningly clean copper hair. But to-night, for the first time, Jean looked beautiful. " When a woman looks really beautiful," Lance had said, " it is because she is thinking of a man, a man with whom she is or wants to be in love."

—What man ? Lance ? Phil Lowitz. . . . Never, that lame, dark, detached cynic. Jim ? Marilyn's throat contracted with a swift, choking wave of fear. Far down below, the bell rang, and they heard Dilly cross the hall to the door.

" That will be Lance," said Marilyn. " He's early. . . ." She picked up her wrap of pale-grey fox, and went out with her smooth graceful step towards the door. Jean followed slowly ; she was thinking that to-night she would see Phillip Lowitz again. She, too, thought of him as dark and cynical, but also as brilliant, clever and important, and also of his strange, unexpected gleams of understanding and kindness. And she did not even remember that he was lame.

CHAPTER 4

MARILYN drifted downstairs in front of Jean, down the turn of the lovely staircase, her cloudy grey skirts billowing about her, the light glinting on the purple stones in her ears, on her wrists, and encircling her slender throat, and Jean behind her, a charming contrast in white. They were like a Sargent picture brought up to date. It seemed as though the lovely old hallway and staircase had been designed expressly for this purpose, that beautiful ladies in beautiful voluminous skirts and lovely jewels should descend slowly and effectively into the hall.

Saxelby, standing in the hall below, looked up at them, and caught his breath at Marilyn's loveliness. She smiled at him, her eyes cool and detached, and he recognised her mood, the mood of charming, distant casualness which he had been fighting through all these weeks that they had worked together. She might put other men at a distance with a little smile, a brief laughing indifferent word, the suggestion that she had perhaps enjoyed flirting, but that there was nothing more in it and they must not presume on a mood of frivolity. But she could not do it to him. He had met it before, and as usual rode rough-shod across her defences, going forward eagerly, catching her hand, drawing her impetuously against him, saying eagerly : " Beloved . . . " Laughing inside himself as the delicate defences went down and the alarm leapt into her eyes.

Her other hand went to her lips warningly, frightened, silencing him, and her eyes glanced back apprehensively at Jean following more slowly down the stairs, her shining copper hair gleaming above her white shoulders. Immediately Marilyn was furious at herself for being taken off her guard, for giving his words any importance. The theatrical habit of endearment was an accepted convention, and a few weeks ago she would have accepted it without a second thought. A few weeks ago she would have said " Darling " or " Beloved " back to him, quite thoughtlessly,

and without an atom of meaning. But a few weeks ago Lance himself would have meant no more than an extravagant tribute to her beauty—he would not have dared to mean any more. What had she done, that he should take her hand, and claim her like this as though he were her accepted lover?

She thought, a little scared, that it was becoming an important thing in her life, this passionate, undisguised admiration of his. She no longer despised or mocked at it. She clung to it as though it were the one thing of which she was really certain. A prop for her damaged vanity? Perhaps—but perhaps, too, it went further than that. She had been so recklessly certain of this small world of hers—this home where she was the undisputed queen. The world outside, the great cloud-cuckoo land of the cinema and theatre, had been the territory she had burned to conquer. This had been the fortress where her heart dwelt, and she had sallied forth to conquer the world of theatre. That had been unsure. That had been unstable. That was where she had been doubtful of her ability, as she worked and fought, driven onwards by ambition. Now everything was reversed. In her work she had triumphed. She had beaten it. It was at home, here, that she was unsure.

But Jean had noticed nothing unusual. Frankly entranced by her own unusually glamorous appearance, she was watching her reflection descend in the big gilt-framed oval mirror hung half-way up the staircase. She held up the white froth of her skirt carefully, so she would not trip, and delightedly watched the toes of her silver sandals as, feeling deliciously important, she stopped and tweaked a lock of her hair into position before she came down the last few steps into the hall. She had noticed nothing, and Marilyn, hurriedly releasing her hand, gave a little sigh of relief, but even as she did so, Lance bent swiftly, brushing his lips against the soft perfumed curve of her shoulder. She stood still for a moment, glancing up at him, half-pleading, half-yielding, a feminine, revealing look of terror and delight, before she moved quickly away.

"Come into the drawing-room, Lance," she said quickly, "and I'll get you a drink before we go. I'm afraid Jim won't

be coming until later, there is a big surgery to-night." If she noticed the little gleam of triumph and pleasure in Lance's eyes she controlled herself, and made no sign. "Jean, will you have a drink, too?"

Jean turned away from the mirror, and came running down into the hall as she spoke. She said: "I'll get some glasses—they're in the kitchen. I told Dilly to set a tray." She smiled politely at Lance, and gave him her hand, amused at the startled admiration in his eyes. "Hallo, Mr. Saxelby."

"Hallo, Miss Dundass."

His light-blue eyes glinted, catching the deliberate distance of her greeting. There was nothing yielding about this feminine barrier. He had come to dislike Jean Dundass. He did not like her cool, grey, appraising stare. It implied criticism, and he was not used to criticism from women. Jean had no wiles or feminine cajoleries. She did not indulge in flirtation as a form of amusement. The mocking little light in her eyes told him quite plainly that she knew a wolf when she saw one, and that she was not impressed. But she was a woman, and a very pretty young woman, and to-night she looked quite charming, so he put himself out to be pleasant, to admire her with his eyes, and ignore the critical mischief of her glance. He took her hand, and pressed it, and said: "You really look lovely."

"Don't I just?" agreed Jean cheerfully. "Every time I pass a mirror, I am struck speechless with amazement at my own glamour. I'm all swollen up like the frog in the fable. If you'll give me my hand back for just a minute, I'll go and get the glasses."

She whisked off into the kitchen, where Dilly was waiting with the tray set with glasses, and two little plates of savoury biscuits and canapes. Dilly was wide-eyed with delight and admiration. It was always a terrific thrill to her to see Marilyn going off in the full feather of evening dress, but to have her adored Jean looking so wonderful as well gave her boundless delight, and seeing it, Jean stopped to parade and preen a little, to let her finger the white chiffon of her skirt, and the green velvet of the ivy leaves.

Lance followed Marilyn into the drawing-room. She had

recently had it redecorated in a paper of pale french grey and silver, a very faint pattern hardly discernible, like the weave of Damascus brocade, just catching the light with a soft glinting shine. The crystal chandeliers which Dilly had so scrupulously washed and polished, for she loved the work of cleaning the glittering rainbow drops, shed a soft clear light on the lovely old furniture, on the soft yet brilliant colours of upholstery in wine and green and deep glowing blue, and the eastern rugs which Marilyn had recently bought and strewn about the house.

Marilyn went to the cabinet and unlocked it, turning with the decanter in her hand. "What will you have? Sherry? Or a cocktail? Or a plain vermouth? We seem to be pretty well stocked, thanks to Jean."

"A cocktail, please." He lit a cigarette, and sat down on the arm of a chair, watching her, a beautiful ghost in her ethereal grey chiffon, beautifully framed in the grey-walled, glowing room. She was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. The fineness of her, the delicacy of her bones, of her head, set on the long, rather lovely neck like a flower on a stem. The colour of her skin, whiter than skin had any right to be, vividly contrasting with the dusky cloudy hair swept severely from her forehead, clustering heavily on her shoulders. She set his blood on fire. Her very fragility raised a curious destructive longing in him. He wanted to crush her, to possess her completely.

He said slowly, and rather indifferently, as he watched her: "I did not realise the Dundass girl could look so attractive. Redheads are not usually good dressers. They will wear shrill greens, and so often have white eyebrows. But Jean looks like a wood-nymph to-night. A Victorian ballet wood-nymph, something from Giselle. Except," he added thoughtfully, "for that very perky Scottish defiance in her bonny grey een."

Marilyn paused, smiling, the description of Jean was so good. She was measuring the gin and lemon juice carefully into the shaker. She said with her usual warmth and generosity, when her own feelings were not involved: "She does look lovely to-night, doesn't she? Jean has awfully good taste . . . about clothes, and everything. It's

a pity she has to spend most of her day in a white starched overall."

"What sort of taste has she in men?" said Lance suggestively.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's quite obvious that she doesn't like me. How about Jim? I should think she and Jim would get along like a house on fire. And I rather wonder, since you so often tell me how much you adore your husband that you care to leave him alone with her so often. After all, as you say, she is very attractive. Even I . . . who want no other woman—except you, even I can see that."

Marilyn put the bottles down on the tray again. Her hands were shaking, her face pale and her eyes suddenly blazing with anger.

"That is what you would like me to think, isn't it? That's what is so strange about you, Lance, you don't hide your beastliness even when you are trying to attract a woman."

He shrugged. "I'm no hypocrite. Don't you find the method of approach refreshingly honest? I want you, terribly, more than I can bear to think about. You are a torment to me. I have no rest away from you, and very little with you. I want you, and I don't care how I get you. But that's not why I said that. I think it's true. Jean's in love with your husband. I've seen it from the beginning."

"So you say," she said rebelliously, shutting her heart against him, unable to shut her ears. "That is what you have been dripping into my ears ever since I've met you. That Jim and Jean are meant for each other, and I'm an outsider. That I am an actress, and therefore out of place in a domestic *milieu*." She paused, and suddenly blazed at him in an access of childlike fury: "You think you can make everyone as beastly as yourself. That you can make it so that nothing here, my home, my children, my life with Jim, matter to me any more. That the only possible thing for me to do is to run into your arms. . . ."

He rose sharply, as though he would take her in them there and then, but she backed away swiftly, her grey skirts swaying away to the far side of a long low table, out of

reach of his long strong hands. She faced him now defiantly, looking straight into his eyes, curiously young and unprotected and innocent, stripped of her theatrical charm and affections. "Well, let me tell you that there is nothing—that I have seen—absolutely nothing to justify those insinuations."

He laughed, his white teeth flashing in swift amusement, and threw up his hands, relinquishing his intention to take her in his arms. "Nor custom stale her infinite variety. . . ." That was true about Marilyn, her moods changed like the colours of a chameleon, and she changed with her moods. She could be so young and childlike, and innocently stubborn, she could be sophisticated and dazzling and artificial, she could be generous and sweet and tender . . . one was never sure whether she would be the brilliant actress or the angry little girl.

"My sweet, you are a very beautiful—ostrich. All right, go ahead, shove your head well into the sand, and don't say I didn't warn you. The truth will only be more painful when you're forced to see it. One can already see a slightly proprietary air about Jean, about everything she does in this house, and particularly everything she does for Jim. I'll bet she put his evening things out to-night, all neatly, like a good little wife, with studs and shirt ready, and suit and shoes neatly brushed. I can just see her doing it, smiling proudly and a little smugly like all good wives do."

The blood flamed into Marilyn's cheeks. "She did," she said defensively. "And why not? Jean's employed to look after us both, Jim and me. I'm—I'm not here to see to things like that. That's why she came here in the first place. That's why I asked her to come. I don't know where anything is, anyway. She gets everything ready for both of us. Jim would certainly never get to a party, anyway, if his things weren't ready for him."

"One can find an excuse for anything one doesn't wish to see. If you can't see it, then I can't help you. Still, if Jim means as much to you as you . . ." He hesitated deliberately. "I was going to say, pretend. As much as you say, I should think twice about leaving them here together while you are in France."

"I may not," said Marilyn quickly. "Phil suggested I should take the children to Brittany with me . . . and take Jean to look after them of course."

"Lowitz suggested that?" said Lance, angry and startled. He had been counting on having Marilyn completely to himself in France. He saw her now with her spare time filled with the demands of a family, and felt faintly ridiculous. Phil Lowitz saw a damned sight too much. It was just the sort of thing he would think of. He recovered himself sharply. "It rather proves I'm right, doesn't it? The way you quite obviously jumped at that suggestion? Why bother to make such an elaborate arrangement unless you'd feel uneasy away from home? You're uneasy to leave them alone together, and you're frightened to be there with me . . . away from all this domestic frilling which really has no part of your life?"

"Afraid?"

"Afraid that you might discover that it's not Jim you love—but me."

He moved swiftly then, with the tiger quickness and ferocity that was so much part of his attraction, and before she could evade him he caught her up into his arms, and covered her mouth and throat with kisses. She hated the sudden half-yielding of her body. She hated him for the truth of what he said. She whispered trantically: "Lance . . . let me go. . . . Are you mad? Someone may come."

In the kitchen, Jean finished her private mannequin parade for Dilly's benefit, looked over the tray and gave the cocktail and sherry glasses a brief final polish, humming gaily to herself as she did so. She grinned mischievously when she realised the tune that was running through her head.

"When the heart of a man is depressed with care,
The mist is dispelled when a woman appears,
Like the notes of a fiddle she sweetly, sweetly
Raises our spirits and charms our ears. . . ."

Association of ideas, she supposed. The handsome, unmoral Lance with his roving, philandering eyes always

reminded her of the raffish highwayman of *The Beggar's Opera*. He was so true to type that she almost expected him to strike an attitude, like McHeath, and cry, "I must have women!" She knew that most women thought him irresistible—it must be quite a change for him to meet one who didn't. She did not think about Marilyn—almost everyone to some extent was in love with Marilyn, and she displayed an extravagant affection to all her theatrical friends. It was only with Jim that she was quietly tender and sincere. Jean did not give the matter a second thought. She picked up her tray and went into the hall, breaking forth into song as she went.

"Roses and lilies her cheeks disclose, but her ripe lips are more sweet than those . . ." She stopped, staring. "Why, Jim?" She put the tray down on the table in the hall. "Aren't you well? Is anything wrong? What's the matter, Jim? Shall I call Merry?"

Jim was sitting in a chair by the surgery door, his hands hanging loosely between his knees, staring down at the black and white squares of the marble floor. She thought he must be ill. He was extraordinarily white, and he had the shaken, exhausted look of a man who has just received a sudden overwhelming shock. He raised his head, looking up at Jean blankly for a moment, and then, catching her words and realising her anxiety, pulled himself together, rising and shaking his head with an attempt at a smile. The colour came slowly back into his face, but the dazed, shocked look persisted, in spite of his efforts to hide it behind casual words.

"No, don't call Merry, for heaven's sake. It's nothing. . . . I was just upset about something. Look, bring me a drink out here before you go. Stick it down here on the hall table, and I'll pop out of the surgery and get it the minute the next customer has gone."

"I don't have to go into the drawing-room to get it," she said hurriedly. "There's some brandy in the kitchen. Sit down and wait there. I shan't be a moment." She flew back into the kitchen, snatching up a glass from the tray, and poured him out a stiff brandy and brought it back to him, watching anxiously as he drained the glass at one gulp.

He gave a little gasp as the spirit caught his throat, shook his head, and stood up.

"Hmm. That's better, I needed it. Sorry to scare you, Jean. I say, I am a fool!"

Jean said a little crossly, for she always felt responsible if anyone at Riverhouse was the least bit ill. "You can't put me off with a radio crack, Jim Grayson. What made you feel that way? Aren't you well?"

"It's nothing at all, I tell you," he said a little crossly. "It's—well, if you must know, some people come into the surgery with some pretty grisly stories, and to-night one woman had a rather grim one. It made me feel a bit green. I thought I'd put all that sort of squeamishness away with my student days, but it seems I'm not really hardened after all."

He gave her back the glass, and as she took it she still hesitated, watching him with no attempt to conceal her concern and anxiety, not in the least satisfied with his explanation, quite sure in her heart that this was not the real reason for his distress. Jim had held hospital posts before he went into private practice, and had seen far too much sorrow and distress to be upset like that by a patient's sufferings.

She gave a little sigh, and said: "Well, will you be able to come with us to-night? Will you feel up to it?"

"Of course. Why not?" A shadow crossed his face, and his voice sounded slightly irritable. "It was nothing at all. Don't fuss about nothing, Jean. I'm not Jose, or one of the twins."

"Oh, I wish you were," she said practically. "I could pack you off to bed without any further argument."

He smiled.

"Dear Jean. Look, I must get back to the surgery. There are still three or four patients waiting. Just forget all about it."

Jean half-turned to take the glass back into the kitchen.

"All right," she said reluctantly, "you're the boss. And you're the doctor too, so you should know what you're about. But there are cleverer doctors than you, Jim Grayson, that have got ill through looking after their patients and

forgetting themselves. If Marilyn knew, she wouldn't go to this party, and I wouldn't blame her."

He turned sharply at Marilyn's name, a curious expression, almost of pain on his face. He stood at the surgery door, looking across at her. "Jean. Promise me you won't say anything at all to Marilyn about it. I don't want to worry her . . . or . . . or spoil her party. It was nothing at all. Now promise me."

Jean looked at him searchingly, still very worried, anxious to help if she could in any possible way, but not wishing to interfere in anything that did not concern her. She was tenacious by nature, and not easily put off where her duty was concerned, except on this one point. People who insisted, under the name of friendship, of prying into your private thoughts, she considered were more nuisances than friends. It was quite obvious that whatever had been the cause of his distress, Jim did not want Marilyn to know about it, nor did he wish to discuss it further.

"Of course, Jim," she said at once, "if you don't wish me to, I won't mention it."

She took the glass into the kitchen, and then went back through the hall, picking up the tray of glasses and carrying it into the drawing-room. She set it down on the elegant little Regency sofa-table where it was convenient to serve drinks. Lance was sitting in the corner of the sofa, lighting a cigarette, and Marilyn was on the far side of the room, looking, apparently with deep interest, at the titles of the books in the top of the bureau. Jean glanced swiftly at the two studiously absorbed faces, immediately aware of some strain in the atmosphere, and hoped secretly that Marilyn had lanced his self-conceit with one of her sudden flashes of impatience and temper. Marilyn was rarely sarcastic, but when she was her soft sweet voice could drip acid instead of honey, and it was not often anyone who had known this particular mood would provoke it again.

Marilyn took a large volume of Keats out of the bureau, and flicked over the pages as though she were looking for some particular quotation, and said quietly: "You've been a long time, Jeany."

"Yes, I was showing Dilly my dress, and Jim wanted a

drink, so I got one for him. He looked a bit under the weather. He works too hard." She picked up the cocktail shaker, added some ice from the dish she had brought in with the glasses, screwed down the top and gave it a vigorous shake. "The trouble with Jim," she said a little impatiently, "is that he will try to mend people's lives as well as cure their ills. You just can't take everyone's troubles on your shoulders, but he does, and now they expect him to. Sometimes I'd like to shake some of his patients . . . like this. . . ." She unscrewed the shaker and poured out the drinks, neatly measuring each one with an expert eye and steady hand. She stood back, smiling up at Marilyn with her warm, mischievous little grin, and added confidentially: "And I'd like to shake Jim too, sometimes."

Lance rose, and took the drink from her hand, trying it and saying to Marilyn: "Perfect!" Then to Jean: "Jim's a very lucky man to inspire such—loyalty and service."

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. "Oh, he is indeed. I'm a treasure. Everyone tells me so, so I'm beginning to believe it. But . . ." Her eyes suddenly softened, thinking of the beautiful house, and how happy she had been looking after it, and all the people in it. She smiled, thoughtfully twisting the little glass in her hand. "I'm lucky too, you know. Not everyone has such a pleasant home."

"Nor such a—pleasant employer?" suggested Lance.

"No," she agreed. She was quite unaware of their glances meeting above her bent head, and the flicker of mocking triumph in Saxelby's eyes.

The strain, the sense of tension was there, all the way across London to Phil Lowitz's home. Lance sat at the wheel of the great sleek car, and Marilyn next to him. Jean was alone in the back, dreamily watching the traffic and the people as they drove through the West End. She was vaguely aware that Marilyn was talking a great deal, and mostly nonsense, and was surprised, because it was very unlike her. She wondered if she could be excited, and dismissed the idea, because parties, even parties filled with celebrities, were common enough things in Marilyn's life, and she had never before been unduly excited about one.

She herself was too much excited to take much notice. The thought of the evening before her seemed as glamorous as Cinderella's ball. It was her first really big London party, the kind that she had read about in the newspapers and magazines, illustrated with shiny pictures of people in evening dress, laughing and talking, holding little glasses. Famous people. She would be there herself this evening, seeing film stars in the flesh, even talking to them, and of course, she told herself, a little primly, she would see Phil Lowitz again, though there was really nothing to be excited about in that.

In the darkness at the back of the big car, she nearly laughed out loud at this bare-faced attempt at self-deception. The truth was she was absolutely dizzy with excitement at the thought of seeing him again. The idea of seeing famous stars and beautiful frocks really meant very little to her. She would be seeing Phil. She remembered all the times she had thought of him since his gift of flowers and his greater gift of understanding that had brought about Dilly's honesty and happiness, and wondered if he had ever thought of her, if he had ever given the matter a second thought. Probably not. He was a famous and successful man with a busy and absorbing life. There was no reason why he should think of her at all among the hundreds of people he must meet each week. And yet, even while she told herself this, very calmly and reasonably, trying to keep the sensible, practical Jean to the fore, the gay and impulsive, romantic Jean that her school mistresses had so deplored, 'well in hand, her heart was racing, and her eyes dancing at the thought of seeing him again.

She did not go out a great deal in London, and had made no new friends since she had been at Riverhouse, except for friends of the Graysons, usually married couples. She had known plenty of boys back at her home in the north. She wrote occasionally, and so did they, and sometimes they would visit London on business or pleasure, and would call her up and take her out. They were nice boys whom she had known most of her life, and she was very fond of them—but this was quite different. This was a man older than herself, polished, sophisticated, different. A clever man,

and to her an attractive man. There was something about his very foreignness, although the quiet voice spoke without any thick middle-European accent, that attracted her. She could remember what her old Scottish grandmother had said about her. "Aye, she's a quiet, canny Scots girl, is our Jean, but there's Border blood in her for all that. It's dangerous blood for any lass, and if it's a mon that rouses it, he'll have to run gey fast to get away!"

She felt the dangerous blood run up her cheeks in the dark. Well, her grandmother was wrong in one respect. She was not going to run after anyone—certainly not Phil Lowitz. Because if he really wanted a woman he would take her and claim her as his own. She thought confusedly: "I suppose it's because, apart from Jim, Phil's the only really interesting and exciting man that I've ever met that I'm . . . thinking like this."

She looked at Lance Saxelby's blond head, shining in the street lights as the car wound through the traffic, and wondered why she had not included him. It simply had not occurred to her. He was exciting—as exciting as an escaped tiger, and as trustworthy. But to her he was neither interesting nor attractive. His excessive masculinity repelled her. To her there was no sincerity in him at all. And though most people would have called him a supremely masculine, athletic type of man, he played tricks, like any ageing coquette, to attract women to him.

She snuggled down into the back of the car, her hands folded tightly in her lap, like a little girl going to a Christmas party, holding down the wild excitement with all her will power, oblivious of everything but her own exciting, secret thoughts. Oblivious to everything—not seeing that Saxelby had reached over, and under cover of the smoky grey furs that Marilyn wore, imprisoned her hand. Not knowing that Marilyn, afraid that Jean might notice, dare not pull it free: that she was sitting taut and tense beside Lance, her gay voice talking on almost automatically, conscious of nothing but those caressing fingers moving over her wrist and palm.

In the back of the car Jean was lecturing herself sternly, determinedly trying to put the cool and canny side of

herself in control again. Just because she was interested in Phil Lowitz, just because she was grateful to him for what he had done for Dilly, and thought of him rather often (*all the time*, whispered her heart) it did not mean anything—not anything important. She was thinking like this all the way over to St. John's Wood, all the way along the tree-shadowed drive to the graceful old Regency villa where he lived.

Lance parked the car under the trees among the other rows of shining vehicles, and they got out and stood for a moment in the circular gravelled court looking up at the white painted, charming old house, with its double bows running up the floors, crowned with delicate little iron balconies. The door was flanked with slender columns, carrying a domed porch, and the door was painted a pale french grey. The curtains were undrawn, and lights shone in every window, and there was the muffled sound of music, and voices and laughter. Jean's heart, which steadied demurely under her severe self-lecturing, suddenly began to race again.

"The Chief certainly does himself well," said Lance grudgingly.

"It's a perfect house," said Marilyn. "Even Jean could not find an undusted corner. And Phil has perfect taste."

Jean followed them up to the door, and when the butler opened it she was standing a little behind Lance and Marilyn. She saw Phillip at once, standing at the bottom of the stairs, where he could greet his guests as they entered the hall. All her lecturing was completely useless. He was just as she remembered, dreamed, imagined. Thin, with a taut sense of hidden strength that his elegance made less apparent, dark and distinguished, with still the little weary look of pain about his mouth, and the fine intelligent eyes, quick, intensely observant, intensely aware. Her heart was beating like a captured bird in her breast. For one terrified moment she wondered if he would even remember her, and it became terribly important that he should.

Then he glanced away from the people with whom he was speaking, and saw her standing there in the doorway behind Marilyn and Lance, the light from the glittering chandelier

making her hair like burnished copper, her eyes shining like summer stars.

His face changed to a new awareness. Then with his quick, quiet courtesy, he excused himself from his companions and came straight across to her, holding out his hand in eager greeting. Although it was Phil's party, it was typical of the film world that it was always the actors that attracted the attention. Lance and Marilyn, the moment they crossed the threshold into the brilliant, crowded hall, were engulfed in a crowd of friends and admirers, before they had even had time to greet their host. Phil and Jean were therefore isolated among the crowd. Everyone was looking at the two stars. They might have been completely alone. They stood quite close together, her hand in his, both of them a little overwhelmed at the pleasure they had in seeing each other again.

He was taller than she remembered, much taller than she was. She had thought him smaller, perhaps because she had unconsciously measured him against Jim's gaunt height, and Lance's lionine fair immensity. She slowly disengaged her hand, annoyed at finding herself flushing, shy and tongue-tied, unable for the moment to meet his penetrating glance. She summoned her courage, and looked up at him again, and found him looking down at her. She was aware that in a subtle, almost imperceptible way he had changed. Perhaps no one but herself would have seen it. But all his cynical detachment had gone, with the faint touch of scorn from the straight, charmingly sensitive mouth. There was a new gentleness, and a new personal awareness of herself, a look that might be called tenderness. She found it exciting, bewildering and wholly unexpected. Her fears that he would have forgotten her or might not notice her evaporated, leaving her feeling confident and happy.

"Well," he said gravely, "haven't you anything to say to me?"

Jean said hesitatingly: "I think I've too much to say. I've been rehearsing a speech of gratitude for a long while now, but somehow, now you're here, it seems to have come a little unstuck." She drew in a breath, and began determinedly, rather like Jose when she recited poetry. "Thank

you so much for sending Dilly that necklace, Mr. Lowitz. We had all been dreadfully worried about her, and tried to help her, but nothing seemed to work. You must be a psychologist, because it was exactly the right thing to do . . . she's been quite different ever since. She's really beginning to look different too . . . quite pretty and bright. It was a wonderful idea of yours, and we're all terribly grateful because we're all so very fond of her."

Phillip's face took on an expression of rather gloomy disappointment.

"Is that all?" he asked blankly. ..

"Heavens, isn't it enough? It sounded an awful lot to me."

"Well, I hadn't even thought of Dilly, though I'm very glad to hear she's happy now. I was hoping you were glad to see me again too, and were going to tell me that."

"Oh, but I am, really I am," said Jean eagerly, then catching the twinkle in his eye, blushed with confusion. "You're teasing me," she accused; then her head went up defiantly, the copper hair swinging like a shining bell, the grey eyes glinting a little; "and I'm awfully bad at this sort of thing, anyway."

"What sort of thing?" he said gently. "Returning thanks?"

"No! I suppose you might call it flirting . . . or coquetting, perhaps? When people say one thing, and mean another." She was very grave, only the ghost of laughter, and that was at herself, shone in her grey eyes. "It's the sort of game that attractive people always seem to play, saying one thing to draw the answer they want, and flattering without really appearing to flatter. Perhaps I can't think quickly enough. When I like a person——"

"Me, for instance?"

"Aye, you, for instance. It's no use at all for me to try and find a roundabout way of saying, I like you awfully. I just have to say it, right out, or keep quiet."

He said gently: "Oh, darling Jean, my bonny Jean. . . ." And laughed, and drew her arm through his, throwing her short little fur wrap over his other arm. Her hand, resting

on his sleeve, felt the taut muscle under the fine smooth broadcloth, and was surprised again. In this slender, limping body there was a controlled and unsuspected power. She glanced across at Marilyn—she was entirely surrounded by an eager group of chattering people, and Lance's blond head was in close attendance. They would not miss her, nor notice that she had gone. Phillip was leading her from the hall, past the door of the big drawing-room, where most of the party were gathered. She had a brief gleam of an elegant Regency interior, complete with Chippendale chinoiserie and pale striped wallpapers, but he led her onwards, up the shallow curve of the stairs to the first floor. He was smiling at her as they went, and without thinking, she accommodated herself to his slow limping gait, smiling too, content to follow where he led, content to be taken anywhere that he should wish.

"For a girl who professedly does not know how to flatter or flirt, I think you have done very well indeed. You've classed me among the attractive ones, you've told me that you like me very much, and, though not in so many words, that you were dying to see me again. Observe me with all my defences broken, purring like an overfed pussy cat with masculine conceit."

They were half-way up the stairs. "What about your guests?" she said a trifle apprehensively. "Won't they wonder where you are? You haven't even spoken to Marilyn or Lance."

"My guests, my dear, are nearly all actors, and I know that actors will be quite happy talking about themselves until *rigor mortis* sets in. You have never played in a film or a play, so here you are important to no one except me. I'm just the boss . . . they won't even miss me, and they'll be able to say a lot of nasty things about me behind my back, which will give them a lot of pleasure."

"You don't seem to like them very much?"

"I know them very well. A few, like Marilyn, are worth while. But they're the bricks out of which I build my castles in the air. So long as they are the best for the job, why should I care what they say or do? I like simple people, Jean, like you. I want to show you my house. I've only just

moved in, so it's been decorated. This is a house-warming. I've been collecting furniture for a long time, and now I've somewhere to put it. Since you moved into Riverhouse, and I saw how a house can be run by someone with efficiency *and* imagination, I've been a tyrant in the home."

"I don't believe you could be," she said. "It's all talk to frighten folk. But you don't frighten me."

His mouth tightened with a touch of the old bitterness and cynicism.

"What do you know of me?" he said.

"Oh, I know a lot. As much as you know of me, and by the way you've been talking that's a fair bit. I think you could be very cynical, and bitter, and bad-tempered . . . those little lines about your mouth were made by bad temper. And most damnably irritable. I should imagine when you're working you expect everyone to leap at your command like a regiment of soldiers. . . . I should imagine you get wild with impatience when people don't think or act or see things as quickly as you do yourself."

He stopped, his hand on the study door, gazing at her with amused surprise.

"What a character to give me! Though I won't say it isn't true. What is this—a bit of Highland second-sight . . . or do you think I've had enough flattering and smoothing down for one evening?"

"Och, neither, it's all very understandable. You've a lame foot, and it's probably very painful at times. It aches perhaps, and makes you tired, and it wears away your nervous resistance. It makes you irritable, and impatient—but not tyrannical. A tyrant thinks no one but himself has any rights. You couldn't think like that, even though you could hit some people for their foolishness."

Phillip felt a queer, odd little glow of pleasure. It was simply a miracle. Most people avoided all mention of his lameness, trying to pretend it did not exist. A few had dared to pity him, but not for long. His bitter self-consciousness of his deformity was a hangover from his bitter childhood. But Jean spoke of it as a fact, nothing more nor less. It quite obviously meant nothing to her. She neither pitied nor avoided the subject—it was there and she spoke of it;

that was all. It seemed to put things into a different perspective, quite suddenly, and in a clear, different way. He looked down quizzically at his left foot, with the thickened ugly sole. Perhaps, never before since he had grown up, had he really looked at it. He said blankly: "You're not sorry for me?"

Jean laughed at him. "Good heavens, I should think not. I admire you, you know, because you're so clever, but when you say that, it's so silly that I wonder whether you're clever at all, but just plain lucky. With your sort of brains, what does it matter whether you have any legs at all?"

He said, still with the blank, puzzled, unbelieving air: "You mean, you just don't notice that I'm lame?"

"Of course I do. I notice that you are tall, too, taller than I thought—and that your eyes are dark. You notice everything, don't you? That Marilyn is beautiful, that Dilly is simple and that I have a funny nose. Your foot is part of you." He noticed, with a queer little rush of tenderness, how very Scottish she was when she was at all excited—she said "fuit" instead of foot, like a Highlander. He thought with an inward smile that in future he would always refer to it as "the fuit" and that he would never hate it quite so much again. "If one likes people or is interested in them, one notices everything about them, and one wouldn't have them any different, even if they could be magically changed. Because those things are what have made them what they are. I don't mean to say that I would not like you to have two whole feet—that I would not like you to be able to dance, or to play football if you wished." Her mouth quivered for a moment with laughter, meeting the laughter in his eyes. She could not imagine him playing football, even with two sound feet. Fencing, perhaps, or running, but not football. "If you hadn't had that foot, would you have been so sorry for Dilly? Isn't it because you have known hurt, you can be kind when other people are being hurt? You think that leg has been a drag on you. Are you sure it hasn't been a very necessary brake? With your impatience and quickness, wouldn't you perhaps have ridden roughshod over people to get your own way, unless

that had made you slower and kinder . . . more understanding. Don't you get the best out of people that work for you because you *are* kind and understanding? Isn't that why—why I like you so much?"

His face warmed to a sudden new youthfulness. "You are a darling, Jean. A complete and utter darling. You make the world right, tidying up the bits and pieces as you go through it." He opened the study door, and stood back for her to go in. "Come and see my study. They have just finished decorating it, and you're the very first person to see it apart from myself and the servants." She went past him into the big blue-walled, book-lined room, and he added suddenly: "Anyhow, I don't think it's a funny nose at all. I think it's quite lovely, and exactly right for you."

"There you are," she said eagerly. "You *see* what I mean?"

He shouted with delighted laughter, and the colour ran up her face protestingly, but she began to laugh too. "I didn't mean it quite like that," she said.

He stood by the door, watching her move slowly about his room, thinking how pretty she was in her white dress, with the green trail of ivy across her white shoulder. Her shoulders were so white too, so that one could hardly tell where the fine, exquisite skin ended and the chiffon bodice began. They were young, and small boned and slender, but straight too. Nothing about Jean drooped. She had all the shining beauty of youth. The clear eyes, the gleaming hair, the beautiful skin, the firm confident mouth and chin. And yet there was a wisdom about her too, she was calm and patient, and feminine wise. She sat down in the big chair covered with crimson brocade that stood near the fireplace, and looked round the room, taking in every detail with an undisguised professional interest. She was a homemaker, and she was interested in anyone's home, and she was very, very interested in this particular one. She looked at the ceiling-high bookcases, the soft glow of the Persian rugs and the old, fine polished furniture. She missed no detail, and finally her eyes came back to Phil again, and she gave a smiling little sigh.

"It's lovely," she said. "Everything is perfect."

He gave a grave bow, accepting the compliment for what it was—the opinion of an expert. He did not speak for a while, wanting to prolong the moment of having her there with him in his room. He felt extraordinarily happy in the sense of unspoken friendship and understanding. He was watching her, loving her, delighted with her, and with the sensation her ingenuous honesty created in him. Little crystal bubbles of laughter that rose from some inward depth. Living in a world of artificialities he found her serious, sensible naivety both comical and adorable.

Life had given Phillip Lowitz a great many gifts that he was profoundly grateful for—his work, the opportunity for self-expression, quite a lot of money, and a considerable amount of fame. But laughter had never been part of his daily bread. And Jean made him laugh—she made his whole being laugh with a new delight in living. She made him think of mountain air, and the bright gay little flowers that grew so sturdily along the snow-line. His heart filled with well-being and a foolish burst of poetry. She was like all good things, all good, sweet, clean natural things. Things of the home and the heart. Clean laundered linen, and the smell of new bread, the scent of simple garden flowers, and the thrush's rapturous song at dawn. She was young and honest and courageous, and as sound as a hazel nut. She looked upon life and found it good and enjoyed every minute of it. Whatever she did in life she would do with her whole heart and all her ability, and do it well. He wanted to prolong this minute of finding her for ever if he could. The minutes which sometimes plodded dully for him were suddenly racing away behind him into time. The clock ticking away through their silence seemed faster than ever before. Jean raised her head again, meeting his eyes, quering his silence.

He broke it with an effort and a question. "Nothing out of place? Colours right? Furniture? No carpet or picture to straighten, no small corner undusted?"

She made a little face at him. "All right, I know very well what I'm like. There is no need to rub it in. I know I'm for ever straightening, smoothing and tidying. Marilyn

says it is quite impossible for me to go through any room without automatically emptying the ash-trays and shaking the cushions straight, and you know I don't even know I'm doing it."

"That's why you do it so well, because you do it without fuss, and you never make anyone feel uncomfortable about it. I like tidy people who don't resent other people's untidiness."

"There would be no work for me if everyone was tidy. That's why I've loved working at Riverhouse, trying to make everything right for them. Marilyn's such a good actress and Jim's such a good doctor—it's right that people should work at the things they are good at, and leave the clearing up to people like me." A thought struck her suddenly, and she looked at him with a worried little frown. "You don't suppose," she said anxiously, "that I'm kidding myself, do you? That I'm really just an interfering busybody, making my tidiness an excuse to poke my nose into other people's business?"

At her anxious eyes, and the sudden serious roll of Scottish rr's, he laughed again, and went over to a cabinet in the corner, taking out glasses and a half-bottle of champagne.

"We'll have a drink here together, away from the crowd," he said. He drew the cork carefully, filled the two hollow stemmed goblets and carried them across to her. She rose and took the glass from his hand. He lifted his glass to her, saying: "If ever, Jean, you should see my life getting any particular wrinkles in it that you think look untidy, please be as interfering as possible, and start putting them straight at once. Will you promise me?"

"Are you sure I shall do the right thing?"

"As sure as I am that your eyes are grey."

"Very well, then, I promise."

"Then we're friends?"

Her eyes lit up eagerly, and her "Yes, surely," was as soft as a sigh.

"And you will call me, Phillip? I've been calling you Jean—perhaps that was impertinent, without your permission? So I'll ask for it now."

"Och, aye, Phillip," she said softly, mocking his seriousness just a little. He lifted his glass again.

"We'll drink to that," he said.

They pledged each other, Jean's nose wrinkling as the wine fizzed at the back of her palate. He took the empty glass from her hand, and shivered both glasses on the stone hearth. Jean's Scottish blood rose in protest.

"They're so pretty," she said.

"They were," he said gravely, amused by her expression ; "but where I was born it's a custom to break glasses after a pledge—it's unlucky to use them again, in case the pledge be broken."

"Well, I hope you don't make many pledges," said Jean practically, "or you won't have a glass left in the house."

They were standing very close together before the big open hearth. There was no fire burning, for it was a warm summer night ; it was filled with a great profusion of blue flowers. As Jean spoke, Phillip realised how much he wanted to kiss her, and once again the little bubbles of laughter rose within him, like bubbles arising in a glass of champagne. Here he was, Phillip Lowitz, successful, sophisticated and experienced, well into his thirties, and having, as far as women were concerned, a reputation for cynicism and indifference. Phillip Lowitz, who had thought, until this moment, that life had little more to offer, indeed that it had never offered him very much at all except success. Here he was, longing to kiss a pretty girl with the enthusiasm of a schoolboy, and feeling as thrilled as a schoolboy about it.

What he had had from life he had taken, determinedly and forcefully, allowing nothing to stand in his way. And now all he wanted in the whole wide world was to kiss that fresh, candid, smiling mouth that was being offered to him, with no thought of allurements or temptation, with no faintest shade of lust. Just there, below the level of his own lips, waiting like a posy for him to stoop and take.

A servant opened the door. Phillip straightened away from Jean, and turned round, his face like a thunder-cloud.

"What the devil do you want ?" he demanded.

"Dr. Grayson has just arrived, sir," said the man. "I thought I should tell you."

"Oh, Jim"—Jean turned eagerly, her eyes alight—"he'll be awfully shy about these people, Phillip. He won't know anyone here. We'd better go down."

The manservant went out again, closing the door behind him. Phillip stood, not moving, a scowl between his black brows.

"His wife is here," he said crossly. "Surely she can introduce him to a few people."

"But you're the host," she reminded him, and leaned forward, lifting her lips and very briefly and gently touching his angry mouth with a kiss. "Don't be cross, or I shall be afraid of you. Is that what you were wanting?"

"Jean . . . !" he said unsteadily, and caught her up against him, pressing his mouth down upon hers, wanting to hold her, to keep her with him and savour this moment to the full, shaken that her light touch could stir him so. Throughout his lonely, suffering childhood he had taught himself to be steeled against emotion, to be suspicious of affection, and it seemed so long now that he had felt anything except the thrill of a job well done and the triumph of success. He had forgotten his heart, so completely had he been ruled by his head. People said his films were cold, clever, beautiful—but emotionless. Was it because he had forgotten that feeling could be this sudden, consuming, splendid flame?

Jean drew away, smiling. "Come," she said, slipping her hand through his arm. "If I'm tidy, then I'm also very conventional. It's very rude to ask people to a party and then to neglect them."

He put her hand momentarily against his lips, and they went out on to the long upper gallery which looked down on the hall below. It was a wide pillared hall, with a polished floor where people were dancing to a small band, hidden from where Phillip and Jean were standing by the overhanging gallery.

They went to the balustrade of floral ironwork, and leaned over, looking down into the crowd of dancers from above. It was like looking down into a bowl of tropical fish as the bright frocks gleamed and moved in the lights. Laughter and snatches of conversation and the cloying sweetness of

the women's perfumes and their flowers came rising up to them on the warm air.

They saw Marilyn dancing gaily with a very famous and very distinguished actor who was playing her husband in her present film. Sir Matthew Miles was not a very young man, but he was a very handsome man. He had made the hearts of nearly three generations of female theatre-goers beat a little faster, and he could flirt just as airily and charmingly as Marilyn herself. They were both obviously enjoying themselves very much. The handsome head, with its slight touch of grey over the temples, was bent attentively to catch her every light word, with all the confidence of a man to whom charm is a valuable professional asset.

At the foot of the staircase, Lance Saxelby stood, his almost white-blond head towering above everyone, his handsome face cold with anger. His was the attraction of the magnetic male animal, the attraction of superb strength and power, and almost classical good looks. Charm in his own sex he neither liked nor understood, and he was both lost and infuriated that Marilyn should be so interested and happy.

Sir Matthew had whisked the delighted Marilyn away under Lance's nose with a courteous apology, and indeed she had gone into his inviting arms with relief, and was listening to his absurd flatteries and witty absurdities with sheer delight. The atmosphere between her and Lance was becoming increasingly explosive, and it was a relief to break away from it even for a few moments. Never for one moment did Lance let her forget him and his importuning. He knew how much he attracted her, and he would not let her forget that either. Away from home her mind was always looking for strategies to avoid him, to avoid being alone in his company. And this was her solution to-night. She would just flirt and laugh with this gorgeous Sir Matthew until Jim arrived, and keep Lance well at arm's length. She must not risk any repetition of the scene at Riverhouse. The intensity of Lance's feelings, the uncontrolled desire, was something out of her ken. Once he had said he would rather destroy her than lose her, and she had laughed at him, but she was beginning to think it might be true. And she was

beginning to be afraid—not of him, but of herself, and of the waves of suffocating emotion that his touch could rouse within her. Once she knew what her reactions would be, once the whole game had been in her control. But not any longer—it was getting out of hand, it was threatening to devour her.

Lance watched Marilyn angrily for some time, and then, glancing up, saw Phillip and Jean looking down from the gallery above. He turned his back on the dancers, and came slowly up the stairs towards them.

"Hallo," said Phillip. "Having a good time?"

"I was until that posing old ape started chasing Marilyn," Lance said angrily. He came and stood by them, looking down into the hall.

Marilyn had taken an orchid from one of the baskets of flowers that decorated the hall, touched it with her lips and given it to Sir Matthew, who put the absurd, beautiful butterfly of a flower into his buttonhole with a soulful expression of mock delight. "Look at him now. What can any woman see in him?"

Phil and Jean exchanged amused glances, and Phillip said quietly: "You'd be surprised. He's been a top-line draw in the theatres and cinemas since World War One."

Lance thrust his hands into his pockets, scowling down on the dancers below. Marilyn had danced away with Sir Matthew, somewhere under the gallery where they could not see her. She had not looked up at Lance.

"Oh, you look on him professionally, Chief, as you do on everyone and everything. I'm not talking of box-office value, but how a real woman thinks. What do you think, Miss Dundass?"

Phillip made a little bow. "We appeal to the one real woman we know," he said.

"I think Sir Matthew is absolutely gorgeous," said Jean, twinkling.

"He must be sixty-five if he's a day," protested Lance.

Jean shook her head mockingly, enjoying Saxelby's discomfort under this light-hearted competition, enjoying the quiet appreciative smile in Phillip's dark eyes. "If he were ninety-five," she said very seriously, "it wouldn't make the

slightest difference. Most women would still leave home for him."

Lance would not laugh or be laughed at. He said heavily : " I suppose it's not very clever of me, but I'd like to know why you think so."

" Oh, there are so many reasons. He's very, very handsome, he's distinguished. He's a beautiful actor with a dazzling technique. He's witty and he's charming, he's a courtier and he's a gentleman. He always will be."

" Good God ! " said Lance disgustedly. " It's ridiculous. To me he's just a silly middle-aged man."

" He can't help being middle-aged," said Phil. " We all will be one day, and how pleasant to be silly if you can be so amusingly silly. Anyway, you've had Miss Durdass's opinion, Lance."

Saxelby turned away impatiently, as though he would go downstairs again, and then paused as a tall, thin figure came out from under the balcony. " Why," he said slowly, " there's Jim." He gave a little laugh with an odd note of scorn, which made Phillip glance at him with swift suspicion. " Our doctor on the uiles. He doesn't look as though he's going to enjoy himself very much. Perhaps he needs a dose of his own medicine."

Certainly Jim looked ill and tired as he stood watching the dancers, and Jean felt a little stab of anxiety. It was not really a personal feeling, but Jim was so much part of Riverhouse, and if anything went wrong there she always felt an absurd sense of guilt. As though she were responsible for the whole family, children and grown-ups alike. And she had been so happy about them all until just lately. Jim had been looking well, and actually putting a little weight on his tall, spare body, with the domestic worries taken off his shoulders, and Marilyn apparently happy and successful in her work. Jean had been very particular that his meals should be good, nourishing, and regularly served. She never allowed him to go through the day without a meal, as he had so often done before she came. She had from the beginning put her foot down firmly against his habits of irregularly snatched cups of tea, and sandwich meals, hurriedly bolted between surgery and visiting hours.

For a while she had been pleased with the result of her efforts, but now he looked worse than when she had first seen him.

In spite of his curious inward attraction, like a lamp that lit him from within, and in spite of the distinction of his queer, ugly-attractive looks, Jim was rather pathetically shabby and unsuccessful looking among these theatrical people to whom appearance meant so much. His evening suit, which had been made when he was still a student, hung awkwardly on his shoulders, and the white tie which Jean had left so flawlessly starched and white was twisted with his usual absent-minded carelessness into a semblance of a bow.

Marilyn, dancing with Sir Matthew, saw him, and hesitated, her heart touched as always by Jim's appearance—he always seemed so good and real in contrast with her professional friends. She wanted to go to him and greet him, but she did not want to leave her partner abruptly, Sir Matthew was obviously enjoying himself so much. And she was still shaken by the doubts and fears that had tormented her . . . still asking herself in doubt: "Does he want me . . . is it me he is looking for . . . or is it Jean?"

Jean, on the other hand, completely uncomplicated, had not the slightest hesitation. She simply left Phillip and Lance with a brief word of apology, and went down the stairs to Jim, her white chiffon skirts billowing about her, as unconcerned as though she had seen Jose fall in the garden and stand yelling with a cut and dirty knee, or noticed that the nose of one of the twins needed attention. Without a second thought she went through the dancers, across the hall to Jim's side, spoke to him teasingly to make him smile, straightened his deplorable tie with a firm and capable hand, and thinking he still might not be feeling well, said quickly: "Would you like a drink, Jim? There's some gorgeous champagne. It will make you feel a new man."

"New or different?"

"Both." Then aware that both of them were just as little out of place in this collection of glamour and talent, she said: "You and I are the only people here who are not celebrities, Jim. Well, shall we show them how to dance?"

Jim looked at her strangely, as though he had been thinking of something else, as though she had recalled his thoughts from a great distance. He was a little short-sighted, apt to peer a bit without his glasses, and as she brought him back to the dance and the lights and the music, he really saw her for the first time, not as Jean, looking after the house, always there when she was wanted, efficient and good humoured and capable, but as a very pretty girl in a very pretty dress.

"Why, Jean," he said, "you know I haven't really looked at you before. Dilly told me as I came out that you looked like a film star, and really I wouldn't know you from the genuine article."

He smiled his strange, sweet smile, which so transfigured his thin face, and put his arm round her and moved out on to the floor. They danced very well together, with an easy rhythm and feeling for the music.

Lance and Phillip, standing in the gallery immediately above, watched them dancing: watched the white look of strain die from Jim's face as he talked and danced with Jean. Lance glanced slowly from Jean's rusty copper head to search for Marilyn, and saw her standing with Sir Matthew, a glass in her hand, her eyes on the dancers, quite obviously not hearing a single word he was saying. Lance gave a short, triumphant little laugh.

Phillip glanced at him curiously, and he said at once: "One thing about Jean Dundass, she has no subterfuge. She knows exactly what she wants and goes and gets it. So few women do, and when they do they like to disguise the fact. Or they want everything or nothing. They want passion and they yearn for romance, but always want to keep one foot in security and respectability. But not our Jean. That young woman knows exactly what she wants in life."

"What do you mean?" said Phillip coldly.

Lance stared at him incredulously, with a little shout of mocking laughter. "My God, do you mean to tell me you don't know? I thought your penetrating intellect and observation would have seen the whole set-up at once. Don't you see why she took the job at Riverhouse, and why she stays there?"

"Because Marilyn is her friend and asked her to come."

"She doesn't care a hoot about Marilyn or her wants, and never has. Dr. Jim and Riverhouse, those are the goals she struggles for. The perfect setting for Miss Dundass—the perfect *métier*. Where she is needed. And how cleverly she proves to the doctor how much she is needed. How sweet she is with the children, how well the house is run, how long-suffering and gentle, and good humoured and understanding she is. So different from his wife."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I don't *mean* anything. It's quite obvious to anyone with eyes to see. Jean's head over heels in love with Grayson. Very gently and skilfully she is pushing Marilyn out, and very gently and cleverly she is securing her position in his heart and home. Not that I mind. Marilyn wants setting free of it all, and why should we care how it comes about? She'll be a real actress, which will please you, and a real woman, which will please me, when she's got this woman-and-home nonsense out of her head."

The rage swept through Phillip until the great light hall and the shining crystal chandeliers seemed to swing dizzily together. He felt his fingers curling with rage. He wanted to take this blond, smiling, conceited beast and throw him down into the hall. He knew again, with a sick feeling of fury, the impotence of being lame. It was nonsense for him to think like that. Lance was a giant of a man who could strike him down with one hand. The very thought of the man, of touching him, was suddenly distasteful to him.

"That was a poisonous thing to say, Saxelby," he said coldly. "It could do incalculable harm to the Graysons, and to Miss Dundass. From a professional point of view it would be a disastrous scandal. As an actor I should have thought you would have had a little discretion. I'm sorry your imagination runs away with you. If you must think these things, I'd be glad if you'd keep your thoughts to yourself while you're my guest."

His voice was the curt whip-lash voice which he could use to such effect while directing, a tone with which Lance, an unimaginative actor at the best of times, was only too familiar. It seemed to him often that Phillip would whip

him deliberately into a temper on the set. He had very little realisation of his craft as an actor, thinking that his appearance and physical magnetism were all important. He did not realise that the raw-hide flicks of Phillip's tongue made him angry, and when he was angry he was animated and magnificent. He was no physical coward, but he was a little afraid of Phillip. Phillip had made him a star. He was the boss. He could make or break an actor if he wished. The thought that so often flashed through his mind, "one day, when I've made enough money to be free of him, I'll wring the little brate's neck," came and faded at once. His career had been unspectacular until Lowitz had engaged him . . . he tried, laboriously, to joke his way out of Phillip's displeasure.

"Now, Chief, for heaven's sake. Don't go up in the air over a bit of gossip. I'm not acting before the cameras now, you know."

"You never do, Saxelby," said Phillip icily. He stared at the tall fair man, his black eyes implacable, the bitter, angry lines about his mouth sharply etched. Saxelby literally shrank before him. "You cannot act. You are a beautiful young man who photographs well, but actors have to understand emotion. You have no emotion—only appetites. That is why I am so consistently filthy to you. When you're in a temper you look magnificent—when you're afraid you express something at least. You're afraid of poverty. Of going back to the small parts, and shabby touring companies. If you're going to stay in this business you either have to obey your director—or learn to think, which, I'm afraid, in your case is impossible. But that's beside the point. While you're in my house I'll have no grubby studio gossip about my guests."

His voice was light, detached, mocking, and it goaded Lance into sudden defiance. "You have suddenly become very moral! Why should you be so very particular about other people's reputations? I suppose that it was your idea that Marilyn should cart her entire family to France? So that she would be occupied off the set? To keep her out of my dangerous clutches when we are at Château Benodet?"

Phillip looked at him levelly.

"That was exactly my idea."

Saxelby flushed angrily. "Why are you so interested in Marilyn? What has her private life to do with you? Unless, of course, you're in love with her yourself." He looked down on Lowitz from his towering height, and suddenly his pale eyes lit with a sudden illumination. "Or perhaps it's the little red-headed Jean. Perhaps you want your pillow smoothing, and your life straightened out." He gave an amused, scornful laugh. "Don't kid yourself, Lowitz, you're wasting your time. I told you—and I know that household pretty well. Jean's in love with the doctor. She's after the doctor—in full cry."

"*Saxelby!*"

Lance was silent.

"I told you I disliked your conversation, and I dislike you even more. I'm quite aware that I'm unable to throw you out of my house, but, by God, unless you keep quiet I shall certainly tell my servants to do so!"

Saxelby looked down into the fine-drawn, angry face, and his spurt of defiance faded to nothing. He knew, from bitter experience, that Phillip never made an empty threat, and no thoughts of scandal or bad publicity would stop him if he once decided to put that threat into execution. He had a sudden panicky vision of himself being put out of the house by three or four struggling servants. Well, Phillip Lowitz might be invulnerable as far as the press was concerned, but he certainly was not. For Phillip had the cinema world at his feet. Lance hurriedly drew in his horns and made a belated effort at appeasement.

"I'm sorry, Chief. I seem to be annoying you to-night. It's nothing . . . only what everyone is saying. Forget it, and forgive me. I must go and talk to some of these folk downstairs."

He made a little gesture of apology and farewell, and Lowitz noticed, as he had noticed the first time he saw him, how graceful he was. He turned and ran downstairs to the dancers to look for Marilyn. Lowitz saw him standing, searching for her among the dancers. She surely could not be dancing with Sir Matthew all this time? She was not in the hall. Phil's glance moved across to Jim and Jean. They were standing on the far side, between the pillars that

supported the gallery above, and Jean was looking up at him, very small beside his tall, thin height, talking eagerly and anxiously, as though she was trying to help him; as though something was wrong, and she was trying to cheer him up. He watched her stop one of the waiters, take a glass of champagne from a tray, laughingly making Jim drink it, and was angrily conscious that Saxelby had seen her too and glanced up at him triumphantly before he went to look for Marilyn through the other rooms.

There was something about the way Jean looked at Jim, a sort of fond anxiety, a depth of affection, which struck coldly at the new feeling of youth and gaiety which had risen that evening in his heart. Was this why he had struck at Lance so viciously with that cobra tongue of his? Because he too had known about her kindness towards Jim, because he too had thought there might be a deeper meaning to it, and he did not want it to be true? Jean had been very sweet with him that evening, but then she was so sweet to everyone she liked. Perhaps she had merely flirted with him? Perhaps it had amused her to tease him out of his habitual detachment. Surely she was young enough and charming enough to do that if she wished? If that had been so she must think him old enough and experienced enough to enjoy it without taking her too seriously. It was not her fault if she meant more to him than perhaps she realised.

Lance was right about one thing—about Riverhouse, Jim and the children. They all needed her desperately.

“But so do I,” he thought savagely. “So do I! He has so much in life, whatever happens in the future he has known all of love, all of tenderness. I have had nothing but success.”

He stood there, looking down blindly at the dancers, his hands gripping the balustrade until his knuckles gleamed whitely in the lights, agonised with his need for her, his love for her, and the knowledge that he might have to deny that need. Jim Grayson was a good man, and in his quiet unassuming way, even a great man. Fidelity, he had said, that first evening, and Phillip could remember the quiet voice saying it, and the little silence the words into which had dropped. Marriage, real, good, true, lasting marriage was

based on fidelity. Then how about Jim's own marriage? Was it drifting out of those calm waters? Perhaps if love, the centre, the core of marriage, dies, one must find comfort elsewhere or die too. If it has been a real, life-giving thing. And Marilyn, he knew, was for some reason he could not understand being drawn closer to Saxelby. He had seen it daily as they worked under his direction. This he had understood, or at least the man he had been yesterday had understood. Cynical, experienced and worldly-wise, he had known that even women with such good brains as Marilyn could be attracted to a man like Saxelby. Before he had taken Saxelby on contract, he knew there had always been women ready to help him, to provide the comforts a small-part touring actor could not afford. He had known women who were themselves attractive, women who were both clever and discreet, lose their heads, and often their reputations as well, over Saxelby. He was the perfect rogue male, the purveyor of romance, and now for the first time in his life he could afford to love where he liked, and his fancy had lighted on Marilyn, one of the most sought-after young actresses in London.

Phillip turned away, sickened with the whole business, and going back to his study, he poured himself another drink before going down to his guests. A whisky, stiff and neat, to bite his palate and tauten his nerves. The half-empty champagne bottle which had been opened for Jean stood by the flowers on the hearth, the rest of the wine going stale and flat, a memory of forgotten gaiety, and a toast to friendship that perhaps had very little meaning after all.

Jean, feeling that Jim was more at ease, seeing him relax and the new, strange, rather frightening look go from his tired eyes, seeing him talking quite naturally to some friends, looked up eagerly to the gallery, and she felt a sharp pang of quite unreasonable disappointment to find that Phil was no longer there.

Saxelby looked searchingly round the rooms. For a moment the band was not playing in its embowered alcove. Sir Matthew was the centre of a group of laughing people on the far side of the room, but there was no sign of Marilyn. He went from room to room, back through the crowded

hall, out through the long drawing-room, but she was not there. Some friends called to him eagerly, but he smiled, excusing himself, saying he was looking for his partner, and went out through the open windows on to the terrace that overlooked the garden.

There were a few people standing there when he went out, but the music began again, and everyone but a whispering couple on a seat at the far end went indoors to dance. It was a magic summer night, the sky above a brilliant blue spangled with stars. There was no moon, and southward the glow of the West End streets threw a pale luminous radiance against the sky. Below the terrace the long London garden was turfed, and landscaped with flowering trees. He stood, peering across the lawn, and then, beyond the long yellow oblongs of light cast from the drawing-room windows, he saw a pale patch, mothlike in the darkness beneath the shadowing trees.

He glanced quickly around, but no one was watching, and the two in the shadows were far too absorbed in each other to notice what he was doing. He went swiftly, with his quick, catlike grace, down the steps, across the lawn, and into the shadow of the dark copper beech which stood whispering and rustling in the night breeze. Marilyn was there. She stood against the great tree, her head on her arms, her face hidden, her shoulders shaking with terrible, uncontrollable sobs. It was more than just crying, it was a nerve storm, the breaking of strained nerves. Lance went to her quickly, his hands on her slim bare shoulders, not thinking of comfort, not really caring about her distress, but only of the silken texture of her skin beneath his hands.

The sobs ceased as he touched her and she twitched her shoulders away from his grasp angrily, and turned to face him, mopping her tears with a long grey chiffon fold of her gown, looking, for all her tragic eyes, absurdly young and childish and lost, and very like Jose.

"Well?" he said.

This was his moment and he knew it, this was the time when he could claim her. But Marilyn was unpredictable. With the majority of women he could be pretty sure of their reactions, but not with Marilyn. She should be in his arms

now, clinging to him for comfort, for reassurance and balm to her wounded vanity, but she was standing, leaning against the beech tree, and her big eyes looked at him out of the shadows with a resentment and defiance that was anything but reassuring.

"Well, what? Why have you come out here? Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Marilyn, please don't be stubborn, darling," he said. He was like an acrobat, feeling his way soft-footed along a taut rope, knowing that a false move would finish him. What to say to her? How to persuade her? Instinctively he hit straight at the heart of the matter. "You were there, just as I was . . . you saw, didn't you? You were there, and she went straight to him—they went straight to each other, without a glance or a thought for anyone else. You saw her."

"Please, Lance, don't play Mephistopheles; the part doesn't suit you in the least. I'm quite observant."

"She's in love with him, Marilyn. Anyone can see she is."

"What's strange in that? I was in love with him too," said Marilyn fiercely. "You wouldn't understand that. To you Jim hasn't any glamour. You don't know, you know nothing about him, or her or me. Any more than you know anything about tenderness or loyalty."

"Loyalty?" he said sardonically. "I think it's rather late to talk about that."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Then what are you crying about?"

"Because—because she's so right for him, Lance. So horribly exactly nice and sweet and right. Why shouldn't he turn to Jean? She is everything he ever needed, everything I can never be. . . . I've seen this coming for years, I knew that one day he would look at me and find me wanting, and now it's here. Perhaps you're right after all. Perhaps I'd be better away from Jim and Riverhouse and everything . . . better for me and for him. Perhaps if you're an actress and a good actress that is enough to ask from life. You haven't the right to want anything else . . . all the dear and simple things that some women have . . . and know how to keep. . . ."

"You can still have love," he said, and knew the words

sounded hollow and meaningless. For the first time in his life he felt ineffectual. For the first time in his life he was attracted by a woman he did not understand. She gazed at him blankly, and his patience suddenly broke. He stepped forward, lifting her into his arms, crushing his lips down against hers.

For a moment Marilyn was stiff and unyielding in his arms, for a moment she struggled against him, and then suddenly she went limp. She gave a little, throaty, reckless laugh, and her arms went round his neck, giving him a passionate response which drove the blood through his veins like alcohol. •

He said urgently : " Marilyn, Marilyn, you belong to me. You must belong to me now. I can't live without you." He sought her lips again, seeking to hide her eyes, those great shadowy eyes that did not echo the response in her lips, that were still speculative, critical and withdrawn. She might bid her lips and her body to yield, she might go into his arms to discover whether this was the refuge she was seeking, but her mind, herself, her personality was intact and ungiven. It filled him with an unbearable fury of desire.

" When we are in France," he said huskily, " you'll be with me alone. You'll belong to me, and I'll teach you that you have never known what it is to love or be loved."

CHAPTER 5

THE HOUSE was in a turmoil of departure. In an hour Phil Lowitz would call for Marilyn in his car to drive her out to the airport. The company were flying to St. Malo, and travelling by road from there to Château Benodet. Jean was stripping the sheets off Marilyn's bed, and pushing them into the soiled-linen basket. The light suitcases, and big hat box, packed with Marilyn's luggage and labelled for the plane, stood ready to be taken down to the car. Jean had the keys in her pocket, together with Marilyn's passport and travelling cheques, ready to give them to her before she left the house, knowing that in her present abstracted, careless mood she would probably put them down somewhere, and at the last moment would be unable to find them.

Jean stood with the lacy edged sheets piled in her arms, looking at Marilyn's big bed. Then with a little worried sigh, she carried the linen out to the basket, and coming back, spread the coverlet carefully over the mattress. She knew there was something wrong between Jim and Marilyn, something unspoken and yet hanging like a shadow over the house. She wished she really belonged to them, that she was not just a friend, but perhaps a sister, so that she had the right to speak about it and to drag it out into the open. She knew that since the night of Lowitz's party Jim had slept in the little dressing-room next to the big, luxurious bedroom, because each day she made up the two beds. Before, he had used it occasionally if he had a late call and did not want to disturb Marilyn when he came home. But now it was every night. Jim was working harder, and he seemed more tired, he had lost a lot of the light-hearted gaiety that had been so apparent in her first months at Riverhouse. He and Marilyn did not quarrel, nor did she know that they had quarrelled . . . but all the old tenderness, the old careless affection had gone. Now she no longer rang him up with absurd, teasing messages at any hour of the day, he did not, forgetting Jean was present, stop behind her chair, and tip up her face to kiss her. Once their glances

and hands would meet about the casual tasks of the day with an affection they never thought to hide. It had all gone. Riverhouse was no longer a happy house, it was just a well-run home for two busy strangers.

Marilyn was never in the house ; working or not she was out most of the day, only returning to change to go out in the evening, to parties, to premières, to balls. Jean had begun to take over secretarial duties as well as housekeeping, and it seemed that from morning until night the telephone was busy with demands for the time and presence of Marilyn Falaise. Not for Mrs. Grayson. She had apparently given up any attempt to mix her professional and private lives. Never, since that night at Lowitz's, had she ever asked Jim to accompany her anywhere. She had various escorts, usually men of her own profession. Sometimes the charming and courteous Sir Matthew Miles, sometimes Phil Lowitz, but most often Saxelby. She was very often with Saxelby. Newspapers wrote tit-bits about them in gossip columns. " Marilyn Falaise was there wearing a crinoline of rose satin and black lace. Her escort was the handsome Lance Saxelby. Her doctor husband, Miss Falaise told me with a rueful laugh, was far too busy with his patients to accompany her to such frivolities, however much they both might wish it." There were photographs of Marilyn and Saxelby smiling at each other, and into the press cameras. As Jean went about her shopping, she heard people talk about them ; in the shops where she dealt, and where they were known, she heard them drop their voices, or suddenly change to another subject. The people from the Vicarage, the few local artists and writers who lived along the river, and made up their local acquaintances, never mentioned it. She wished they would. A month ago even, they would have said joyfully : " My word, Marilyn in the paper with Lance Saxelby. How does Jim compete with all that rampant male glamour ? " But not now . . . it was too obvious, and perhaps in their kindness they feared too serious, to make jokes about. They were Jim's patients, and his friends, and they were all very fond of him.

Jean made up Jim's narrow little bed in the dressing-room, and collected the flowers from Marilyn's room. Jose was

sitting on the top step on the landing outside hugging her knees, white and peaky, her enormous dark-blue eyes seeming to fill the little white patch of her face. She was, Jean knew, waiting for Marilyn to come out of the bathroom. She followed her mother about like a shadow when she was in the house. There had been no further mention of the children going to France. To-morrow they were being taken to Whitesands to stay with Jim's mother.

Jean sat down beside her, took out a handkerchief and gave Jose's nose a perfunctory wipe, and said: "Why don't you go and play with the twins in the garden?"

"They're in the sand-pit. It's boring. I don't see how they can bear to go on doing the same thing day after day."

"Most of us come to it," said Jean gently, and stretching out her arms she drew Jose towards her. Jose relaxed a bit and put her head down with a little sigh on Jean's shoulder. She had accepted her completely now, and gave her the abstract affection that she gave to anyone she liked. Her passion was for her mother—other loves were only very light. Jean drew her close, and found she was shivering, although the day was warm and fine.

"Are you cold, Jose?"

Jose shook her head. Jean felt her forehead, but it seemed normally cool. She took the little face between her hands and tilted it up, looking at her, noticing the distended pupils in her big blue eyes.

"Has Daddy seen you this morning?"

"No, and I haven't seen Mummy either, I'm waiting to see her now. Why don't we all go in on the bed like we used to, while she has breakfast?"

"Mummy was late last night. I expect she's tired."

"You don't think," said Jose slowly, "she's tired of us?"

Jean smoothed the dark, curly hair back out of her eyes. She had the steady gentle hands that give children and animals confidence and relaxation. She said casually, as though there could be no doubt at all about the matter: "No, of course not. I must take you to have your hair cut. Would you like it shampooed and dried under the dryer like Mummy?"

Jose worried, and she worried most of all about Marilyn,

and her imagination could paint convincing and frightening pictures. If she woke in the night she never went to sleep again until Marilyn returned and went in to bid her good night. The telephone had been their great stand by. Dilly would appear at the kitchen door, holding a white and tear-drenched vision by the hand, and say with her monumental patience: "It's Jose again, Miss Jean, thinks her Ma might be dead. I told her it would be in all the papers by now if she was, but shall you telephone that studio?"

Often before Jean had reached the telephone to put the call through, Jose would be reassured. She only wanted to hear Marilyn speak and knew she still existed. Usually she would not mention her fears to her Mother. "I just wanted to tell you about a 'normous boat I saw on the river today . . ." or how good she had been at school or how Jean had let her bake a tart. But Marilyn understood well enough without being told, and would talk and laugh over the phone until Jose felt safe and happy.

But lately, while they were waiting to go to France, Marilyn had not been at the studio. Often Jose would have gone to school before she rose, and was in bed long before she returned in the evening. If she came home to change, Marilyn would go in to see the children, in the perfume and glamour and gleam of her evening clothes, and the twins would plug their thumbs into their mouth, wide-eyed with admiration, and Jose would sigh: "Oh, my Mummy. . . . You are the most beautiful one in the world. I do love you so."

But she was withdrawn into herself, and preoccupied, and each little act of forgetfulness added to Jose's watchful and longing anxiety. Jean knew the signs, the white pinched face, the pupils so big and dark that they made the child's blue eyes look black. She knew that Jose was working up to an attack of hysteria, and tried to divert her. "We'd have it set in curls," she said, "and when you go to Grandma's at the seaside to-morrow, she'll be so surprised."

"I don't want to go to Grandma's," said Jose. "If they make me go I shall die!"

The bathroom door opened and Marilyn came out, fresh and rosy from her bath, and so beautiful in a gown of blue

chiffon, her dark, lovely hair tumbling about her shoulders, that for a moment both Jose and Jean sat looking up at her in silence, like worshippers before a shrine. Then Jose wriggled out of Jean's arms, and leapt up to her mother, clinging to her like a monkey, winding her thin arms about her neck. Marilyn laughed, and held her close, and said : "What's all this about dying?"

"I shall die if you leave me," said Jose.

The laughter went from Marilyn's face. "Whatever happens, darling, I shall never leave you for long. I promise."

She carried Jose across towards her room, and Jean rose to follow them, as she had so often done before. Marilyn paused at her door, the child still in her arms, and said : "Did you want me for anything, Jean?"

"No."

"Well, then, I expect you are needed downstairs."

Jean stood staring at the closed door. The colour burned up in her clear cheeks ; her northern temper, slow to rouse, was suddenly hot in her heart. Marilyn had spoken as though she were a servant, guilty of some impertinence. Truly she had been going to follow Marilyn into her room, to finish tidying, and to help her with anything she had to do. But she and Marilyn had been friends since schooldays, it had been Marilyn who had implored her to come and look after Riverhouse. They always had talked and laughed together, like schoolgirls, going in and out of each other's rooms, and often borrowing each others things. The dismissal had not been rude, but had been very pointed. Jean turned to the top of the stairs, and suddenly the tears stung her eyes. She had been angry, but it was not just that Marilyn was not herself. She was different. She had changed completely. The Marilyn whom she had got out of scrapes at school would never have spoken to her like that. The tears suddenly rose in her eyes, and she hurriedly took out her handkerchief and rubbed them away. Jim came out of the surgery into the hall, and saw her, and said quickly : "What's the matter, Jean? Are you all right?"

Jean put her handkerchief away, blinking a little. "It's nothing." But the watchful doctor's eyes were not easily deceived. He put his arm gently round her shoulders.

"Come along, Jeany! Tell the Old Man. You know, I think you've had just about as much as you can take of this family. Marilyn goes to-day, and the children to Mother's at Whitesands to-morrow. Why don't you take a holiday?"

Something in his tone, the encouraging gentleness, made her turn to him. Her heart was full, and she wanted to ask him what was wrong, why Marilyn was so different to everyone. It might be something she herself had unwittingly said or done. Things like that could happen. Jean could not bear the feeling of misunderstanding hanging over the house. If she had felt happier herself, she would have faced it differently, but Phil had made no attempt to see her or get in touch with her, and that was another small gnawing sorrow. She wanted to talk to someone frankly—"to get it off her chest." It was not in her nature to brood over things, or hug them secretly to her heart, she turned, saying suddenly: "Oh, Jim, why? . . ." When there was a rush of swift footsteps across the landing above.

For a moment Marilyn halted. They looked up, but it was a minute before Jim took his arm from Jean's shoulder. He looked up expressionlessly at his wife.

"What is it, Marilyn?"

"Jose's having one of her tantrums. . . ."

He went quickly up the stairs, and into the bedroom, and for a moment Marilyn and Jean stood looking at each other, and then Jean said: "It's because you're going away, isn't it? She's absolutely terrified about it."

"Why this time any more than any other?"

"She thinks you're not coming back."

Marilyn went a little white, and her hand tightened on the banister, and for a moment Jean stared in dismay at the little flare of dislike in her eyes.

"You know a great deal about her."

"I've learned a great deal, living here."

"And about all of us."

"It's my job. How can I make you all comfortable unless I know about you," said Jean. Suddenly the flare of her temper came to the surface. "I would remind you that it was you who persuaded me to come and take over the house to free you for your own work, and make everyone

comfortable. We have always been friends. If there is any reason why you should regret the bargain you have only to say so. I can always go."

"Yes," said Marilyn strangely. "I asked you to come to free me, and you have done so. I've no ties now . . . none at all . . . except, perhaps, Jose."

Jean lost her temper completely. "I don't understand a word you're saying. You talk in riddles. Surely you've known me long enough to say what you mean? If there's anything wrong—well, out with it for goodness' sake!"

Jim called her from the bedroom, and she said quickly: "It's you who are silly, Jean. Of course I don't want you to go. They all need you far too much."

She went back into the bedroom, and Jean with a little exclamation of anger went into the kitchen. She picked up a bowl with a half-mixed cake which she had left on the table, and began to beat it with such a fury of determination that Dilly glanced at her in surprise. Jim was sitting on the bed holding Jose in his arms. She was not holding herself stiff any longer, and the passionate weeping had died down into occasional agonising sobs. The intensity had gone from her face, and her eyes shone with an eager happy light.

"Well," said Marilyn, "that's better. And what was it all about?"

"Daddy says I can come with you," said Jose joyfully. Over her little brown head, Jim made a warning gesture, and Marilyn repressed her start of surprise.

"That sounds fine," she said. "Well, supposing you go down and play now, while we talk it over."

"All right," said Jose. She got down off Jim's knee, and went to the door, stopping to kiss Marilyn as she passed. For a moment she hesitated, glanced at her father, but he smiled and said: "It's all right, chicken." And, reassured, she went out, and they heard her run downstairs.

Marilyn said coldly: "Well?"

"I'm afraid she heard us last night, Marilyn." His grey eyes met hers across the distance of the room. The room where they had been so close together, and loved so much. They seemed to be standing in different worlds. "She heard you come in last night, and as usual waited for you

to come to her, and as you didn't, crept out to our door." He went to the dressing-table, fiddling absently with the perfume bottles and manicure implements. The cold angry words that had passed between them last night seemed still to echo through the pleasant room. "We certainly did not lower our voices. She must have heard you say that when you had finished filming in Brittany you did not intend to return here. We had not got so far as discussing the children, had we?"

He looked up at her again, seeing her very clearly as she stood by the window in the delicate blue chiffon gown, her head bent, the lovely hair falling forward, almost hiding her face. His heart gave a queer little twist of pain. She must do what she wanted, and love whom she liked. But the thought that it should have ever come to this between them, who had been such friends and lovers, broke his heart. He said, less harshly: "If you want it this way, Marilyn, this is the way it has to be. But we've been too much to each other to part in enmity, surely?"

She turned quickly away, shutting her mind to the appeal in his voice. She did not want to remember that laughing and loving past. It was finished. It was too late. "About the children?" she said quickly.

The note of appeal went from his voice. He said in the quiet, unemotional voice he used in the consulting room: "You know well enough Jose's tied to you emotionally. She always has been. She trusts me, but she loves you so much. . . . I don't really think she could live away from you . . . if she had to now, I'm afraid it would leave a psychological scar for the rest of her life. I've told her she can go too."

"Of course," said Marilyn at once, and the tightness melted again within him. He knew very well what this journey to France was going to be to her—and Saxelby. He could not imagine Saxelby taking kindly to the idea of Jose's presence. But in her love for the little girl Marilyn had not even thought of that.

"I think you ought to take Jean to look after her."

"Don't you think I'm even capable of looking after one of my children?" she said furiously.

"It's not that," he said patiently. "You won't have time. You will be working. She can't hang around by herself all day or be left to strangers. You will have other interests. . . ."

Marilyn took a cigarette out of the crystal box on her dressing-table and lit it. "Don't be so damned tactful, Jim. You mean Lance will be there?"

"Yes . . . he will be there." She leaned out of the window framed in the leaves of the great magnolia tree. Below in the sand-pit, the twins in their scarlet sun-suits were digging industriously. To-morrow, bless them, they would be at their Granny's, digging in real sea sand, playing in the waves. Their sturdy little lives did not depend upon her. They were two strong little halves of a perfect whole, and so long as they had each other they did not doubt that the world was good. It seemed to her that Lance Saxelby was in the room with them, standing between her and Jim, big, blond, smiling. She felt again the flame of excitement that lit her veins at his touch. A flame that was threatening to devour her. If Jim were different. If he would rage and storm, if he would be possessive and jealous, as Saxelby was possessive and jealous, if she so much as glanced at another man. She had provoked that scene last night, hoping, perhaps for that—hoping that Jim would say "You belong to me," and drag her back out of these rapids that were carrying her out of his life. But Jim did not understand possession—only love, and faithfulness. "If you do not love me and you do not want to stay—then I have no right on earth to demand it. You are free in every possible way."

Below in the garden she saw Jean, in her crisp white overall, carrying a tray with beakers of milk and biscuits, come out into the garden with Jose. She saw her sit down on the edge of the sand-pit, and with a flannel and towel, carefully wipe the twins clean before giving them their mid-morning drink. When they had finished, without any of the fuss which they would automatically make with her or anyone else, she would take them off for their rest. She threw the cigarette away with a brusque little movement. She was a fool. Why on earth should Jim *want* her to stay now? She had never been anything but a demander and a

disturber of his peace and life. "A wonder and a wild desire," he once had said. Her mouth twisted a little—it seemed such a long time ago since he had said that.

She turned from the window smiling. "By all means, Jim, let us be reasonable. Of course Jose must come with me. We can't have her upset. Can you spare Jean, do you think?"

He seemed to miss the little, pointed inflection in her voice. "Oh, yes. The twins will be down at Whitesands—Dilly will manage excellently."

"You think she'll come?"

"I'll ask her—she ought to have a holiday. She has worked too hard for us all here, and perhaps been too loyal. They cannot come to-day, of course—it will be about a week, I suppose, before the passports and everything are ready. I think Jean will go if I ask her."

"I'm sure she will do anything you ask," said Marilyn. She sat down at the dressing-table and began to do her hair. There was a faint sound, and she looked up and saw Jim standing just behind her, looking over her shoulder into the glass. He met her glance.

"Good-bye, Merry. Look after Jose and be happy. Let me know what you decide to do when you return. . . ." He paused, and suddenly touched the thick dark shining wealth of her hair with a gentle hand. "Good-bye—and thank you for all the lovely years. . . ."

She sat quite still, disturbed and surprised. He had already reached the surgery door when she rose with a little cry of "Jim . . . please come back . . ." on her lips. When she reached the top of the stairs the baize-lined surgery door had closed. Dilly came up the stairs from the hall. "Mr. Lowitz is waiting downstairs to drive you to the airport, Mrs. Grayson."

Phil was standing in the hall when Jean came through with a twin on either hand. She paused when she saw him, and the colour came into her face, remembering the night when they had talked, and he had kissed her. She was very conscious of the different picture she made, in her practical white overall, from the girl in the chiffon dress. Then for a few hours she had been in his world, pretending for a

moment to be one of the gay and glamorous women he was accustomed to—now they seemed in different worlds again. They had been so near, and so happy, and she wondered now whether it had been the music, or the champagne, or whether she had imagined it all. But she knew it had been real. But he had not telephoned, he had made no attempt to see her again. The week after the party she had waited impatiently and eagerly for the telephone to ring. But it had not rung, and she had told herself that what had been so wonderful to her, and so important, might mean very little to him. He was a clever, rich, famous man, used to women, and used to very much more fascinating and beautiful women than herself. To her it had been a revelation of closeness and friendship—a sweet friendship containing the seeds of love—it was only when the days had passed, and he had made no attempt to see her and recapture that moment, that she began to think perhaps for him it had only been a pleasant flirtation.

But flirtation or not, her throat tightened at the sight of his slender, elegant figure standing so quietly in the hall. It was that curious quietness about him that was so fascinating. Saxelby was a handsome, vital man, restless, graceful, animated. But Lowitz was still, sword-like, and, she thought, resiliently hard beneath that studiedly elegant exterior.

He gave a little bow when he saw her, and came forward with extended hand. If he noticed the colour in her cheeks, he gave no sign.

She smiled, held up her hand, excusing herself. "You must forgive me—the twins have been having their elevenses, and I'm a bit treacly."

He looked at the children with his keen dark eyes, and the twins, imperturbable as ever, stared solemnly back.

"Hallo, twins," he said, and they took their thumbs out, and said in unison:

"Hallo, man."

Jean said a little stiffly: "You're going to have nice weather for your flight."

"Yes, it's a pleasant way of travelling." There was a curious stiffness between them. As though, Jean thought, they were both remembering their last meeting, and he, at

any rate, was trying to forget. She felt a little cross. She said to the children: "Come along, it's time you were lying down. Come and say good-bye to Mummy before she goes."

"You taking Mummy away?" asked Johnny, quite casually, with none of Jose's intensity.

"For a little while, I'm sending her back soon," he said, and met Jean's eyes, reading instantly the thought behind them. Would Marilyn ever come back to Riverhouse? The little sick anger and apprehension rose in Jean again. She suddenly disliked him, and all these film people. They had no roots. They were not steadfast. They only took their artificial shadow world seriously. In real life they did anything that amused them, just for the heck of it, without thought of any consequences or any pain they might inflict on others.

She said impatiently to the twins: "Come along!" And surprised by the sudden sharpness of her voice, they obediently began to climb up the stairs. Phil said suddenly: "Jean," and she turned to face him.

"Yes."

"Jean—please don't look at me like that. You're lumping the whole lot of us together as mountebanks and no-goods. It is not quite fair. Whatever may happen, I don't think you can include me in the blame."

She flushed a little defensively at his accurate reading of her thoughts. She said bluntly: "Why should you care what I think?"

"I care a good deal what my friends think. I have so few. I thought we agreed to be real friends."

She looked up at him quickly, and was about to speak when Jim came out of the surgery into the hall.

"Hallo, Lowitz," he said, and they shook hands casually. The twins had reached the top of the stairs, and were waiting for Jean. He turned to her quickly, saying: "Jeany, hurry up and get those nippers off for their rest, there's something I particularly want to say to you. Come down into the surgery when you can." She glanced quickly at Lowitz, but he did not meet her glance. The brief moment had gone, and she could not at present recapture it. She ran upstairs to the children, taking them through to Marilyn's

room, knocking carefully this time before she took them in.

Lowitz lit a cigarette. Somehow he found himself looking down at Jim's feet—two whole feet. Not misformed, not lame. He said casually: "That's a nice girl."

"Jean?" Jim turned to him quickly. "Jean's the salt of the earth. What we did before she came, heaven knows! And heaven knows what I should do without her now."

There was a little silence and then the sound of a door opening upstairs, and Jim said quickly: "'There's Marilyn. We've said our good-byes. I must get back, there are two more patients waiting." He held out his hand, and for a moment Lowitz thought he would say something further about Marilyn, but all he said was "Good-bye. A pleasant trip, and I hope a most successful picture."

"Thanks. Good-bye."

The surgery door closed as Marilyn came to the top of the stairs, wearing a loose camel's-hair travelling coat over her brown suit, a bright scarf tied round her hair. Jean followed, carrying some of her luggage. Lowitz went to the door, and called his chauffeur to take it into the car. Marilyn came down the curve of the stairs with her swift, lovely gait. She always moved, Lowitz thought, like a swallow in flight. She looked at the surgery door, and then at Phil. "Has Jim gone back?" she asked.

"Yes, he said you'd said your good-byes."

"Oh? Oh, yes." She turned to Jean, and they stood for a moment looking at one another, the anger of the morning still half-remembered. It seemed to Marilyn that it was not her home she was leaving but Jean's—that Jean had taken it away. Or perhaps that was not true—perhaps she had thrust it on Jean, and was now resentful because she had taken it. She did not know. All she knew that there was something final about this leave-taking, and that in spite of everything she had done, and was going to do, Jean had always been her good friend. She said quickly: "Good-bye, Jean—if I was horrid just now, I'm sorry." And suddenly their arms went out, and they hugged each other in the old familiar way, then Marilyn went quickly down the steps with Phil to the car, and they were gone.

Jean closed the door, and went slowly towards the

surgery. Jim had just shown his last patient out, and was washing his hands as she came in. He indicated the chair by his desk, and said: "Sit down," as though she too, were a patient.

She smiled. "Well?"

"Jean," he said, "I want you to do something for me—well, really for us. I know you've done a lot for us, and therefore it's a little difficult to ask."

She said quickly: "Anything I can do to help you, Jim, you know I will."

He said quietly: "You know that Marilyn isn't coming back."

She had known—it had been in Marilyn's face and voice. It had been haunting the house during the past weeks, threatening and unspoken. But hearing it now, her head moved sharply in protest, and she began: "But, Jim . . ."

He shook his head. "It's no use talking about it, Jeany. Marilyn and I have both talked ourselves to a standstill. It hasn't altered the fact that she's grown away from this life here with us." She noticed that he included her with himself and the children, and indeed it seemed to her that she had always been at Riverhouse. She said bluntly: "Is it—Saxelby?"

"Yes."

"But, Jim . . . how could she——?"

He rubbed his forehead with a weary little gesture. "I don't know. Working here with people, I've learned what strange things people do. One just does not expect it to happen to oneself, that's all." He rose, and walked away restlessly, then said: "It's easy enough to understand, I suppose. I used to wonder why she ever fell in love with me. I suppose it's just as easy to fall out of love as in love."

The quiet figure of Phil Lowitz flitted through Jean's mind. Was it so easy? She was not finding it so.

"What is it you want me to do?"

He came and sat beside her. "It's—Jose."

"Yes." Her face was grave, her eyes anxious. "You can't share her, you know, it will tear her to pieces."

"I know," he agreed immediately. "She belongs to Marilyn. She has ever since she was born. I hope I'll see

her often. . . ." He paused, because Jose was precious to him, as precious as her mother had been, and it was not really until this moment he had really faced his double loss. "The twins are all right. Bless them, they haven't an ounce of temperament between them." His smile was a little wry. "They must be throw-backs to my mother—a very sensible person. To-morrow is my half-day, so I shall be able to drive them down to Whitesands. Mother will love to have them for as long as I ask, and she won't worry me with questions. But I want Jose to go to Marilyn, and I want you to take her, and stay, if you will, Jean, until Marilyn has finished this film and has made some arrangements about what she is going to do, and where she is going to live. Marilyn will be busy working, and I can't have Jose left to strangers. Will you do this, Jean?"

"You mean—go to Brittany? To the company? When?"

"As soon as you can get your passports and money fixed."

"That means—during the next few days?"

"Yes."

For a moment Jean sat quite still, thinking of that moment with Lowitz in the hall, when he had said: "I thought we had agreed to be real friends." It had seemed as though he were making some appeal to her. She could not understand him, but then one did not always understand the people one loved. A queer little defiance formed inside her. He would be in Brittany, working with Marilyn. If she went she would see him, and she wanted to see him, she wanted to get through to the essential man. To know him. To find out what he thought and meant. Suddenly a quirk of humour stirred in her. Good heavens, this was not the Victorian age when a maiden waited patiently around, hoping and sighing and wondering. She knew what she wanted, and she could go and find out.

"You're laughing, Jean!" said Jim in surprise.

"I know—I'm sorry," she said, rising. "It was at a private thought, and it's not worth even a penny. Yes, I'd like to take Jose to Brittany. It will be a holiday and a change for me. Thank you very much. I'd better take the car now, and see about the passports to-day."

"Well, that's settled," he said. Then he said slowly:

"I'll miss you like the devil, Jeany, while you're away." As though he was quite sure that she would come back.

In Phil's big car, there was a great bouquet of red roses. Phil dropped them in Marilyn's lap, saying: "They're from Lance. He's very good at these gestures."

She lifted the flowers to her face, loving their colour and texture. "You do dislike him, don't you, Phil. Why?"

He shrugged. "I could give you a list of reasons."

She said, defensively, with a deliberate intention to hurt: "Are you sure you're not jealous of him?"

Instinctively and unconsciously, he drew in his misshapen foot. "Because he has two sound feet, and is a fine, masculine creature? Yes, you're quite right, I am. But that's not the whole of it."

"You know I'm not going back to Riverhouse? That I'm leaving Jim?"

"I didn't know—definitely. But I'm very sorry." He glanced at the white, lovely face bent over the roses, and said sharply: "I don't know what you and Saxelby are contemplating, but I'll be glad of your discretion. There are two kinds of publicity, and I don't want any of the wrong sort."

She said furiously: "Are you telling me to behave myself?"

"Yes."

She said, amazed: "You've never spoken to me like that before, Phil."

"I have never felt so angry with you before."

She stared at him, resentment and astonishment in her eyes. She had heard his bitter tongue before, but never felt its sting herself.

"I don't know what right you have to be angry."

She saw the dark eyes glitter. "I would remind you that before *Dangerous Lady* you were a small-part player. That until it is released we do not exactly know what your future drawing power will be. Also that your contract is just for this one film."

She had been riding a wave of certainty. For the first time she faced the thought that the film might not be a success.

Truly Lowitz had always been successful, but he was risking a lot on her—a completely new star. If she failed? To have been a star, and then fail, was worse than being a successful small-part player. There was less chance for those who had gone to the top and slipped down again than for those who had never been there. It was in these moments of doubt and self-revelation that Jim had always stood by her, encouraging and reassuring. For the first time she realised what the parting meant, how utterly alone she was.

"Are you threatening me?" she said shakily.

Phil shook his head. "You asked me what right I had to be angry, and I'm telling you. Your private life is your own, but your public life is my property. Don't make a scandal. That's all."

She felt the tears sting her eyelids like a scolded schoolgirl, and she was relieved when they turned into the airport gates, and among the little group of people waiting for them she saw Lance's tall blond head.

He came forward quickly, his eyes lighting with welcome, and opened the door of the car.

"Marilyn . . ." he began eagerly, "I thought you were never coming."

Phil Lowitz got out after her. He glanced at Lance, then at Marilyn. "There's a batch of photographers," he said coldly. "Remember what I told you." And pulling his hat down over his eyes he limped off towards the rest of the company.

Marilyn stood alone, smiling over the roses, while the shutters clicked, and the pressmen called: "Look this way, please, Miss Falaise. . . ." "What about a little smile?" And one, more impertinent than the rest: "How about a clinch with Lance?"

She laughed, with her lips, not with her eyes. "That's strictly for the cameras," she said.

Lance took her arm, and hurried her through the crowd towards the airport building. "What's biting the chief now?"

"He just reminded me that he need not renew my contract."

She felt his hand slacken momentarily on her arm, then

he laughed, and said: "But that's nonsense. He will, of course. The *Dangerous Lady* is bound to be a terrific success. . . . Lowitz hasn't made a flop in years."

"But we don't know that yet, do we?" she said gravely, looking up at him. The hand on her arm tightened, claiming her, but the cold blue eyes were remote. Lance himself was no artist in any real sense. He could not understand self-criticism or self-doubt. He had no comfort, courage, or reassurance to give her. He said easily: "Ch, let's leave that bridge until we get to it. I only know one thing. I've got you now. I've got you at last. You've come to me, haven't you, Marilyn? 'This time there's no going back?'"

At his touch, and under his eyes, she felt the stir along her veins, felt herself submitting to his curious power. Like a drug that melted her will away. She was about to reply, when she saw his face suddenly change, change colour, and, turning, saw Phil coming back with a tall, thin man with a curious saturnine face, and quick, watchful, dangerous eyes. It was not until they were very near that she realised he was not a young man, that only his upright carriage and his thinness gave him a deceptive appearance of youth.

"Marilyn," said Phil briefly, "this is Mr. Lakin; he's playing the murdering gardener. . . . Mr. Lakin, Miss Palaise. . . . Your murderess, and Mr. Saxelby."

Lakin raised his hat and bowed without offering his hand. The part was an important one, requiring an actor who spoke French fluently. But all his scenes were exteriors, and it was for that reason that Lakin had just joined the company, for only exteriors were to be shot in France.

Lance said suddenly: "Haven't we met before, Mr. Lakin? Haven't we played together somewhere?"

Lakin shrugged. "Perhaps . . . I have been in many films, and in many parts of the world."

Lance shook his head. "Perhaps it is just that you remind me of someone?"

"Perhaps that is so," Lakin agreed affably. Marilyn felt a queer little presentiment. The voice, smooth and warm, the words precise, like those of a Frenchman who speaks very good English. Yet his eyes were not affable at all.

CHAPTER 6

CHÂTEAU BENODET dreamed in its woods above the sea, an edifice as fantastic as a dream, a grey stone wedding cake, decorated with all the twirls and swirls of Victorian romanticism, not quite knowing whether to be Gothic or Baroque, but combining a mixture of both. Built at the whim of a Second Empire Parisienne, who had pulled down an ancient and sterner manor, it burst like a fountain into fairy-tale stone turrets, fretted galleries, flying buttresses, coats-of-arms, heraldic stone animals, Gothic doorways, wrought iron work, and in a final burst of enthusiasm a chapel which boasted rose and oriel windows and twelve slender towers, on each of which soared a stone angel with a gilt halo, their toes tucked up in fluttery stone drapery, smiling down from their airy perches with a smugness which an occasional broken nose or irreverent pigeon did nothing to dispel. The whole place was charming, wildly picturesque, and with its great dark pines and walnut trees clustering around the airy-fairy towers, a little sinister. A perfect setting for the story which Phil Lowitz had set out to tell.

The story of the *Dangerous Lady* was the story of a Second Empire gold digger—the *femme fatale* beloved of romantic French literature. Marilyn played the part of Yvette, a beautiful but wicked opera dancer, who married a wealthy but elderly marquis, and planned with her impoverished lover, played by Lance, to murder her husband, but was betrayed and murdered herself by a faithful servant. Sir Matthew Miles was playing her husband, and enjoying himself very much, looking extremely elegant in the costumes, and as he said himself, "suffering all over the terrace." Apart from the camera crew only the five principal actors had come to France. Marilyn, Sir Matthew, Lance, Lakin who played the devoted servant, and Lacey Holmes, a mature and charming actress who played Yvette's maid. The chief reason for taking the exteriors in France, apart from the

setting itself, was the festival scene, for which Phil had hired about two hundred people, all of them members of Breton singing and dancing local groups.

All day the *Binioux*, the Breton bagpipes, the drums and little pipes, had been shrilling, and on the big open space before the house, the dancing and singing had moved to and fro, and all day, Marilyn in a sweeping white crinoline, and a beflowered straw bonnet, the camera fixed on her like an enormous eye, wreathed by the concentrated faces of Phil Lowitz and his crew, had run through the dancers, searching vainly for her lover, to warn him that their plot was discovered and must be abandoned.

It was five o'clock before Phil stopped work, and Marilyn went into the dressing-room she shared with Lacey Holmes. It had been fixed up for them in one of the *château boudoirs*. Marilyn dropped into a chair, exhausted. Lacey, who had had little to do that day, was already changed into a summer dress. She smiled sympathetically, and produced a thermos of tea.

"How's it going?"

Marilyn lit a cigarette and took the cup gratefully.

"I don't know," she said; "I don't ever know until I see the whole thing cut and finished. It's only Lowitz who can see the thing as a whole." She sighed, and leaned back in her chair, her white frills billowing about her. She looked exhausted under her make up. It had been a tiring day moving in and out of the dancing figures under the burning summer sun. And Phil had been merciless, driving her and everyone else. When he was working he seemed to have nerves of iron, and a demonic energy. He never tired, and he did not expect anyone else to tire. She put down her cup, and the dresser, a local woman who spoke no English, helped her out of her frock. "Phil's in such a devil of a mood these days, I don't know whether he's pleased with me or not."

Lacey laughed. "Don't be too hard on him. He's an idealist."

Marilyn pulled on a kimono and took off the long artificial eyelashes which were fixed above her own, and began to grease off her make-up. She said abruptly, her nerves jagged

with the emotional tensions of the past days, and the long gruelling day: "A cynic, you mean."

Lacey gave her a quick glance, half-sympathetic, half-impatient. She knew, as everyone in the film business knew, the gossip that was flying around about the affair between Lance and Marilyn, and guessed Phil's attitude towards it. He was proud of his profession and its reputation, and she knew he disliked the wrong kind of publicity. But it was no business of hers. She changed the subject abruptly. "What do you think of Lakin?"

Marilyn paused, hesitated, then said slowly: "I don't *know*. He's a bit of a mystery, isn't he? No one seems to know anything about him. Lance doesn't like him . . . he doesn't like working with him. He makes him nervous."

"Yes, I've noticed it."

Marilyn would not say that Lakin's presence had spoiled this trip—how could it? The man was unobtrusive, quiet and charming, and very competent and easy to work with. But Lance was certain he had seen him before, and the fact that Lakin neither denied nor confirmed it was vaguely irritating, like a memory of a work or happening that by some trick of memory one cannot bring to mind. She had felt, during the last few days, that in some almost imperceptible way, Lakin appeared to be deliberately goading Lance, and yet if she were asked to say how or why, she would not be able to do so. Last night, for instance, he had been there. They had driven together to the big hotel in the nearby town to dine and dance. To-morrow Jose and Jean were coming. She was moving down to the hotel, and she would not be able to give Lance so much of her time. Their time together, with pressure of work, was very limited now, and she had wanted it to be a wonderful evening. But Lakin had been there, dining alone, not intruding his presence upon them, apparently taking no notice of them, but the fact of his presence had irritated Lance past bearing.

"The damned man seems to follow us around," he had said angrily. "I see quite enough of his face on the set all day without wanting to see it all evening." They had left, and gone somewhere else, but the evening had been spoiled.

Lance had been preoccupied—almost as though he were afraid, and his attitude reacted upon her.

She had taken this step, she told herself, because she was in love with Lance, and she did not want to stop and think . . . she wanted the reassurance of passion. She wanted to be adored. She had torn herself up by her roots from Jim, and everything that had been dear in her life, and she wanted him to compensate her for it. To tell her she had been brave, and strong and right. It was ridiculous that this middle-aged actor, whom she had never even heard of a week ago, should by his unassuming presence cast a cold shadow over her life. She could not understand it, and being Marilyn, was impatient of anything she could not understand.

She had discarded her dress, her frothy petticoats, her beribboned bonnet, the long silky false curls attached to her own shining dark hair. She went behind a screen, and pulled on a two-piece swimming-suit of scarlet wool, a white shirt and blue jeans over it, for she and Lance were going to take their supper down to the beach. She said carelessly from behind the screen: "I don't know why the man should be so irritating. He doesn't *do* anything. Or am I imagining it? Doesn't he affect other people like he does me? Do you know anything about him, Lacey."

Lacey had picked up her handbag and was ready to go. A small motor coach took everyone except Marilyn and Lance between the hotel in the village and the location. Lance had hired a car for the time he was in France, so he and Marilyn could have some freedom and privacy. The coach, a rather battered vehicle, stood in the yard, its driver exuberantly tooting a summons on his horn. Up by the gate stood the other coaches which collected the local dancing groups every evening. They were piling in now, chattering and calling to each other, picturesque in their embroidered costumes, the men in their wide-brimmed beaver hats with big silver buckles, the girls in their attractive white muslin bonnets.

Lacey glanced up at the window. "Heavens, listen to that man. How the French love the noise of a motor horn!" She leaned out, and called without any apparent result:

"*Restez tranquille* for the love of Mike! As a matter of fact, I have met Lakin before."

"You have?" Marilyn was startled.

"Yes. I worked in rep with him years ago, when I was just starting. I don't think he remembers me."

"Why haven't you said so before?"

"Well, he was going under another name then. Oh, I know people often change their names in this profession . . . but sometimes there is a reason for them doing so. . . . I mean, if he's been in any trouble, or has some real reason why he should change it, I didn't want to start people talking. You never know, he might have some reason for wanting to forget his past."

"Yes." Marilyn sat before the mirror, combing her hair. "What was his name?"

"His name was Coombe. He's changed so much, I would hardly have recognised him . . . not just that he's older. He was so pleasant, and so kind to all us youngsters, a sort of unofficial father to us, kept his eye on the men we went out with, and gave us long lectures if he thought we weren't behaving. Lent us money to pay our rent when we were hard up and told us we'd be much better off learning to punch typewriters instead of trying to be actresses."

"It doesn't sound the same person at all."

"No," Lacey agreed. "Even now I wonder if it really is. If it's just not one of those strange facial resemblances! He's so completely different. Well, I must be getting back. This French food is giving me an enthusiasm for meals which is playing havoc with my waistline. 'Bye. . . .'"

"'Bye. . . .'"

She went out, and Marilyn watched from the window. She saw the camera crew get into the coach, and Phil, waiting for the others, slim and already dark as a Spaniard from the sun. His white shirt was open at the neck, and he carried his jacket over his arm. He travelled with the rest, while they were here, demanding no special privileges. She had barely spoken to him off the set since they had been in France, conscious of his disapproval. But now, seeing her at the window, he came limping across, and came, as usual, straight to the point.

"Marilyn, you've not been working so well. It occurred to me that I might have upset you the other day. If I did, forget it. I still believe in you as an actress."

"Not as a person?"

He shrugged. "That's not my business." His dark eyes met hers, and suddenly he smiled with his quick, heart-warming charm. "Merry, who the devil am I to lay down laws? If there's anything worrying you, come to me. You know I'll help if I can."

She caught her breath. If only she *had* someone to talk to—someone she could really talk to. She said, with an attempt at lightness: "There's nothing wrong. Only, just one thing. Will you be needing me to-morrow? I'd like to go and meet Jose. If you want me, of course, I'll send a car for her, but otherwise I'd like to go myself."

"That's all right. I want to get all the dances in the can to-morrow. Then we can let the dancing groups go and save some money. We should be murdering you very shortly." He smiled, and said: "Jose flying alone?"

"Why, no; Jean is bringing her."

He turned round swiftly. "*Jean* is coming here? I didn't know."

"Yes, she'll stay until I go back to London. I—that is, Jim felt Jose should have someone she knew on hand—until I'm free."

He stood silently, watching Sir Matthew gallantly handing Lacey into the coach, and she said with a sudden appeal: "What's the *matter* with us all, Phil? I don't know, but there seems to be something hanging over this trip. As though we're all waiting for something to happen?"

He glanced at her sharply. "I know what you mean. . . . It's nothing. Nerves. You'll forget it when you hear the applause on the first night." He turned to go, then came back, his face suddenly serious. "Marilyn, you said, just before we took the plane, that I had no right to order your life. Perhaps I haven't. But I understand you very well, because I understand myself. Marilyn, we are imaginative artists, you and I, and because of that we're vain. We can't help it, it's part of our make-up. To believe in ourselves we need someone who believes in us implicitly, someone who

loves us in spite of everything. I have never had it, perhaps that is why people say my work is cold, that I've never done my best. But you've had it and thrown it away!"

She drew back as though he had struck her. His words coming so suddenly and so simply had driven deep. It was something she had tried to ignore, and she would ignore it. She had made her decision.

"It's too late to think of that now, Phil," she said shakily.

He turned away and went over to the coach. She thought she had never heard anything so lonely as his voice had been. "I have never had it." Yet his life was full enough, there was surely one woman among the many he knew willing to fill that place. Unless he was still looking for the one right person. The one right person who always understood; who always forgave, the central safety and core of one's existence-- Jim? Her heart contracted with a little wave of pain. One could have a hundred lovers, and among them not one who could give you that inner strength. She put her hand over her eyes. Damn Phil, why had he to say this to her now, when she wanted to forget? Lance drove the big Renault he had hired into the courtyard, stopped under her window, and got out. They were walking down to the château beach, which was private and quiet.

"Ready?"

She looked at him, for the first time consciously comparing him with Jim, comparing what she had with what she had lost. She would not think of it. She would not. It was too late now.

She snatched up her coat and beach bag, and ran out to join him.

The sun was setting, painting the water to glittering gold as they swam, slowly, playing in the water like two seals. This, at least, thought Marilyn, was sheer heaven. Here at least, she and Lance were matched, two water creatures, with perfect confidence, swift and strong and completely unafraid. They swam out to a little yacht, moored out in the still, lonely, almost land-locked bay. On the shore the pines grew down to the edge of the sand, and soaring above them like a pink frosted cake in the setting sun, stood the château. Lance dived in, cutting the water like a knife, and

she watched the wet yellow head surface before she too went in, and they swam back to shore. They had brought a picnic dinner of bread and sausage and fruit, and a bottle of wine, and they collected some driftwood and made a little fire, although the night was hot. After they had eaten, and lit cigarettes, he pulled her down against him in the sand, and a little breeze, like a mournful sigh, ruffled across the still water and stirred the pines. He threw his cigarette away, turned, and she saw the pale sky blot out behind his head as his lips bent to hers. She clung to him. This was what she had chosen, this was happiness, this must be happiness, the feel of his strong shoulders beneath her hands, and the little flame that licked through her veins at his touch. But to-night, for some reason she could not understand, the flame was still, and Phil's words: "You have thrown it away," marched relentlessly through her thoughts. Lance drew her closer, wild with her nearness, and she lay submitting, not resisting, strangely alone in his arms.

There was a little sound, a little crackling sound like a twig cracking under a foot, and Lance raised his head.

"What was that?"

"It sounded like a twig snapping." She put her arms up round his neck, eagerly. She must light the flame again. She must. It was the one thing left, the passion he had kindled, and she had fought against. . . . If it was not there, there was nothing.

He said: "Twigs don't snap themselves. I'm going to have a look" He rose, and climbed up the rocks behind them, and went among the pine trees that grew in the rising ground beyond. Marilyn sat up, and in spite of the warmth, shivered a little. She put on another piece of driftwood, and poured herself a cup of wine. The sun had set now, and the sky was a pale lemon glow. Far out the fishing boats were creeping out of harbour, their lights shining like fireflies. Lance came back and dropped down beside her.

"I thought it might be that damned Lakin," he said moodily. "He gets on my nerves, creeping about after us."

She tried to laugh. "He's not here . . . and it was surely pure accident that he came last night?"

He put his arm round her shoulders, his fingers playing

with her hair. "I never seem to get you to myself . . . we're working all day. The cafés are always full of the gang and when we go off to dance, Lakin turns up. I thought we'd be alone here."

"So we are—quite alone."

"Yes." He turned her head sharply with one movement of his strong hand. "Yes, and we'll come to-morrow . . . and to-morrow. . . ."

She held back from him. "To-morrow Jose is coming. She's sure to want me to stay with her on her first night here."

"Jose?" he repeated. "Your little girl?" He glanced at her suspiciously. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I—it wasn't arranged until the day I left. I—I thought you might be angry."

He rose to his feet, saying irritably: "You're darned right about that. I suppose this means you'll be moving back into the hotel with the rest?"

"I'm sorry, Lance. I should have told you. But she found out that I was leaving Jim . . . and she and I are very close together. I had to bring her. She was thinking I was leaving her, and I couldn't let her do that."

"I thought you were going to cut away from all that," he said. "I thought you were going to start a new life with me?"

"I thought so too," she said. "When we talked about it, it seemed easy. But I have three children, Lance—I can't push them out of my life, and I don't want to. I love them too much."

He laughed then, turning up her hand to kiss the palm. "You're a sentimental little silly," he said. "If children are fed and clothed and cared for, what more do they want? You know as well as I do Jean Dundass can look after them better than you ever can, I've told you so before."

She stood up, pulling on her woollen jacket, suddenly stubborn, and against him. "Not Jose, Lance. It's not a matter of *looking after* her. I know she was never properly looked after until Jean came to Riverhouse, but still she loves me best. If I'm not with her . . . her life is empty. Do you understand that?"

"No," he said explosively. "I don't. Not with a child. What do they know of love? What are you going to do when we get back to town?"

She felt the breath of repulsion. What did he know of anything but desire?

"I'm going to a hotel until I can find a flat, and Jose will live with me."

"Don't you see you'll never cut yourself free like that? You're trying to build a new life with one hand and cling on to the past with the other. You can't do both. You've to make a clear clean break. Supposing Phil carries out his threat and doesn't renew your contract, what will you do with a child to look after?"

She looked at him, suddenly scared. She had been earning big money, and had grown used to spending it. Now she was responsible for herself and for Jose—she could not ask Jim for money. Why did Lance pull her down? Why did he destroy her faith in herself and what she could do, if he loved her? Phil's words came to her again. "We need someone who believes in us implicitly, who loves us in spite of everything," and thought of Jim. How when she was struggling and unheard of he had encouraged her, who when before Jean had come, and she had neglected him and the children in her devotion to her own work, he had never questioned her right to it or her ability. She said suddenly: "Lance, you have never asked me to marry you." And at his quick movement towards her, she stepped back, her hand outstretched to prevent him from touching her. "No, I don't particularly want you to—but I should like to know why?"

"I don't think it would work—for me." He smiled, and she saw the whiteness of his teeth as they gleamed in the red firelight, and was conscious again of his strange, intense, animal attraction. Suave, masculine, beautiful, and quite heartless. "It didn't work for you either, did it, darling? be honest? It's better for people like us to be free. What do we want with the clutter of domesticity, and its promises of eternal love, its irritating responsibilities. This little girl of yours, for instance. You are dragging her out here because of your conscience. Do you really want her? Of course

you don't . . . you want to be free to love me, to enjoy me . . . and when either of us get bored, then we can part. . . ."

There was a long silence. Then Marilyn said: "It sounds like a perpetual adolescence to me." She paused again, and said: "I've only just learned that sophistication doesn't always mean that people are grown up."

The log of driftwood fell, sending up a flame and a stream of sparks, lighting her as she stood there, her hands thrust into the pockets of her jeans, her black hair loose about her shoulders. She looked extraordinarily young, and untouched and remote. It was perhaps because of this curiously youthful, almost virgin, look of hers that he had never really associated her with children, or a family . . . he had thought them just tiresome hindrances, from which he could cut her free. He did not care about this, not even now, he did not care about anything except this cool slender beauty of hers, which it seemed impossible to completely possess. He wanted to see her possessed, as other women had been, glad to leave or destroy anything if they could to be with him. He put out his hand, slid it up her bare arm under the warm sleeve, his fingers biting into her skin as he drew her to him. She was escaping, and he did not want her to escape yet. Somewhere under the trees a twig cracked again—and they stood motionless, listening, gazing into the darkness outside the little circle of firelight.

"It's cicepy here," said Marilyn. "I et's go."

They drove back to the town, and went to a café overlooking the harbour. There was an accordion band inside, and some sailors were dancing. Several of the company were about and Lakin passed, lifting his hat with his usual grave, unsmiling dignity.

"He's a very good actor," said Marilyn. "You would never recognise him as the untidy French peasant he plays during the day."

"I wonder if he was creeping about in that wood," said Lance sullenly.

"Of course not, why should he?" she said. One of the boys in the camera crew was dancing with Lacey, and they were making inviting signs, urging her to join them. She

smiled and shook her head. She was tired, she wanted to be alone, and to think about herself, about Jose, Lance and her future. She must learn to do what Jim had said, decide for herself. She had been letting herself drift too long. She said idly: "Lacey knows Lakin. She's worked with him before, when she was just starting. She says he called himself Coombe then."

"Coombe?" She glanced at Lance quickly, struck by the curious sharp note in his voice. His strange, attractive, light-blue eyes had narrowed, and in the light coming from the café windows behind them he looked curiously pale.

"Yes—why? Did you know him then, too?"

Lance shook his head. "No. I've known several people of that name, it's fairly common . . . and I may have met him, of course, back in Australia, when I was a kid just starting on the stage. He reminds me of someone I can't place. You know when you say you have a word on the tip of your tongue? This is the same feeling—about a face. I find it a little—unnerving."

"So should I."

Marilyn looked across at Lakin—or Coombe. He had sat down at a table in the next café, just beyond the usual little barrier of box trees which French cafés use to mark their boundaries. He ordered a Pernod, opened his *Paris-Soir*, fitted a cigarette into his long ivory holder, and leaned back to get the light well on to the paper. The picture of an elegant old boulevardier enjoying his evening drink.

She shrugged. "I never saw anything less sinister in my life than Mr. Lakin at the moment," she said. "It's something you are creating, not he. Curious because . . ." She paused, she had been going to say and quite truthfully: "Because you're not the imaginative type." And the memory of Jim came like a flash across her mind. Jim, the imaginative, with nerves taut to other people's sufferings. Jim with his great depths of understanding and tolerance. She looked across at Lance again, hating the way she did so. As though every day—almost every minute—she looked at him a little more clearly, seeing him differently, and not liking what she saw. She said quickly, trying to forget her thoughts: "I am sure in any case he could not possibly

be an Australian. I have never seen anyone more completely European in all my life."

The tension dropped from his face, and he smiled at her, his hand beneath the table seeking hers. She controlled an instinctive movement to avoid it, allowing his fingers to close down over hers. She had deliberately chosen this. A sudden extraordinary panic closed down on her, as though she were in a trap. She had an hysterical desire to jump up and rush away. She must not. She had done this thing—she had come away with Lance on a rush of thoughtless impulse and passion, and now she must think before she acted. Now she must know what she was doing.

He said: "Let's go back to the villa. Why do we come to the cafés in the evenings? They're a bore. I want you to myself."

Marilyn stood up, and made herself go with him to the car, a slim figure, graceful but not boyish, in spite of the well-cut jeans and the open-necked shirt. As they went across the road Lakin put down his paper and watched them.

The villa where they were living was a short distance away from the village and the hotel where the rest of the company were staying. It was an elegant, comfortable little white house, perched on the edge of the cliffs. It belonged to a friend of Lance's, and he had rented it for the short while that he would be in Brittany. A caretaker and his wife who lived at the little gatehouse looked after them. The woman in her big white Breton cap came forward now, smiling and asking if there was anything they wanted, if they had dined?

"Would you like something else to eat, Marilyn? It wasn't much of a dinner we had."

"No, thank you." She hesitated, and then said quickly: "I'll go up and have a bath and change. I'm all salty from swimming."

He smiled slowly, his eyes running over her, meeting her eyes again, waiting for the answering response and finding none; finding only the grave, curious expression he had met before in her eyes that evening. He said urgently: "What is it? What's the matter? Why do you look at me like that?"

She turned away. "I'm going up to my room."

"I'll come up in a moment. . . . I'll bring some wine. . . ."

She ran upstairs, across her bedroom with its long windows and big carved gilt bed into the bathroom. She turned on the hot tap. A brown luke-warm trickle ran into the shining porcelain. Impatiently she turned on the cold, and went back into the bedroom; Marie, the caretaker's wife, had put one of her house-coats out on the bed, the one of fine white cloth, rather like a monk's robe with its big loose sleeves lined with yellow silk. Her slippers of yellow and silver embroidery lay on the carpet near. At Riverhouse—at home—it had been wonderful to come home tired from the studio, to bath, to dine quietly with Jim and Jean, or often Jim alone when Jean was out—to sit, enjoying the quiet evening, talking or reading, or listening to a play or concert on the radio. It was different here—she went to her window, and looked out. Lance's bedroom was next door, both rooms had long windows opening on to the balcony overlooking to the sea. Marie was out there now, putting out the long lounge chairs and cushions, the small table with the glasses and the bottle of iced wine, almost as though she was setting a stage scene.

"The great bedroom scene again," she thought mockingly.

"The only one that Lance has any talent for."

She put her face down into her hands. Here was no pleasant evening's relaxation. It made no difference that she was independent, paid all her own expenses. Lance looked upon her and treated her like a kept woman. Like a woman who was there merely to pander to his appetites. To look beautiful, to flatter him, to be always ready for his ultimate passion. It gave her a feeling of shame. Of revulsion. Of disgust. A week ago she had thought herself in love with him. Now she was learning the truth about herself and him. He had attracted her physically, as he would always attract any woman who was not sexually dead. She remembered Jean's name for him, "Tom-cat." Jean saw his attraction, but she had seen his character and personality as well. She had seen his selfishness, his vanity, his uncontrolled sensuality. Cool, calm Jean, who could smile, and mischievously turn down every approach he ever

made towards her. He didn't like Jean. She was too wise. She went into the bathroom, and stepped into the cold water, her brown skin, warm with the evening heat, shivering as she sponged herself down.

Why had she done this thing? She was impulsive and emotional, she knew—but to come away with such a man, as she had done, without a thought of what kind of future they might have together, was completely insane. She dried herself, and went back into the bedroom, a slender ivory figure, looking down thoughtfully at the long gown spread out on the bed, facing a clear moment of realisation. She had gone to Lance, throwing herself into the blinding excitement of his love-making, simply to forget how much she had loved Jim. How much she still loved him.

She had gone with Lance as some people get drunk when life confronts them with a problem they cannot bear to face. She did not want to cry, nor was she afraid. The feeling of being trapped left her. She was not trapped, not, unless she wanted to be. She had come here willingly and got into this herself, and she could get out again. She was sober now, and the pain which she had avoided facing was still there. She loved Jim. She always had, ever since she met him, she always would, until her dying day. Love. Passion was only one of the many facets of love. People flung themselves into affairs, and talked of love, and they knew nothing about it. There was tenderness and loyalty, there was friendship and understanding, there was patience and kindness and laughter. Passion could fuse these into love—into a love indescribably precious and beautiful. But passion by itself could not create them.

Lance tried the door, and knocked, and she raised her head, her long hair slipping over her brown shoulders.

"I'm not ready," she said flatly.

"Well, let me come in."

She said: "No!" And heard him say, huffily: "Oh, very well," before he walked away.

She said calmly to herself: "What does one do now?" And her curiously clear, analytical thoughts began to answer. If you were weak or stupid, she supposed you bought another bottle of whatever you had made yourself drunk

on and got drunk again, and kept on getting drunk, so that you were never sober, and never had to face the reality that horrified and frightened you. Or she supposed you could go from *affaire* to *affaire*, and try to forget in the excitement of a new lover. It was easy enough to get new lovers if you were a pretty woman, just as it was easy enough to get bottles of whisky if you were rich. And so the years would go by, the glamour fading, the excitement becoming sordid, and oneself getting coarser and more excessive. Because people got used to these things. She had met people who drank, and she knew that as they went on it took more drink to shut out that encroaching reality. The ghost of unhappiness had to be faced. Sooner or later it would stalk through the drunken haze, or look over a lover's shoulder into your eyes, even as he held you in his arms.

She stood, rubbing her bare toes into the thick carpet, her face calm and contemplative. She knew what she was doing now, and she was not travelling that road . . . she loved Jim, and however it hurt she was not going to destroy herself trying to forget it. It was better to be lonely and wise.

She went to the cupboard and got out a plain thin suit and cotton shirt, and began to dress, quickly and quietly making her plans as she dressed and packed. She had only brought two light cases, and her jewel and writing-cases which she carried. She had made no real plans, and travelling by plane had limited the amount they could carry. She was glad now.

She rang for Marie and asked where Mr. Saxelby was, and was told that he was still in his room. Marie stared at Marilyn's trim navy linen suit and white blouse. She glanced quickly towards the bed, and noticed that the gown had gone. She glanced apprehensively at the two cases standing by the bedside. It was quite obvious to her that Madame was leaving, and that the pleasant week of service and tips was ending sooner than she thought. Marilyn took out a couple of notes and gave them to her.

"Will you please carry my things into the hall, Marie? My little girl is coming to France to-morrow to stay with me, so I have decided to move into the hotel to-night. Will

you ask Pierre to put my things in the car, and have it round in about ten minutes?"

She went along the passage and knocked at Lance's door. He opened it eagerly, and stood there for a moment smiling down at her, and then slowly the smile went from his face, and a different expression glinted in his eyes, a little hint of brutality which she had never seen before.

"Where are you going?" he said sharply. "What are you dressed like that for?"

She said quickly: "Lance, I told you I was going to move down to the hotel while Jose was in France. Well, I've decided to go down to-night. It's only just nine. Pierre can drive me down in the car."

Until that moment she had been quite fearless. As she looked at him it seemed to her that the pupils of his eyes became so small that they disappeared. It was as though the cold, light-blue irises went vacant and blind. He had not moved. He was as quiet and still as one of the great cat animals as they crouch to spring on their prey. In a flash of fear Marilyn realised that Lance was not speaking because he could not. That if he spoke he would shout at her, that if he moved he would strike her. That he was for the moment still and blind and thoughtless with fury. And for the first time since she had known him she was afraid. She had been afraid of herself before . . . afraid of his attraction for her. But this was different. This was the cold fear, the horrified fear which one has of a dangerous beast.

For a few moments it seemed to her that they were both suspended in time. Not speaking, hardly breathing, staring into one another's eyes, as though they were seeing each other for the first time. Then suddenly he caught her wrist, drawing her up against him with one swift, savage movement.

"You're not going to-night," he said harshly. "You came here with me and you're going to stay. You gave up all that. You belong to me. I'm not going to let you go."

Lance Saxelby had known a lot of women, and most of them behaved as he expected them to behave. To melt when he kissed them, and cling round his knees imploring forgiveness if he threatened them. Marilyn did neither.

She was terrified of him, because never in her life had she known physical violence, but although she was frightened she neither yielded nor attempted to run away. Her blue eyes blazed defiance.

"Let go my wrist!" she said. "Let go my wrist, or else I'll scream until everyone within hearing comes to this house. I will not be bullied, Lance. If you hurt me, I shall never speak to you again!"

She felt the hard, strong fingers relax, and as she did so her fear vanished. The sense of having walked into a trap went. There was nothing to be afraid of, there was nothing there but physical attraction and power. Lance was like a sleek and lovely tiger; crack a whip across his shining hide, and he backed away, puzzled and startled. Perhaps a little scared, she thought contemptuously. He was frightened of that thin-boned, middle-aged Lakin, for no real reason except that the man obviously disliked him. He was frightened of her now—because she was stabbing at his vanity, by wanting to leave him, by not being reduced to a shivering mass of anticipatory flesh at his mere touch.

The hand that had gripped her wrist rose again, and came gently about her shoulder, the blind furious eyes were now smiling at her.

"Come in and sit down for a moment," he said. "I'm sorry, Marilyn. The truth is, I love you, and I'm crazy about you . . . more than any woman I've ever met in my life. After all these months of waiting I got you. . . . Do you think you can calmly tell me you're walking out without . . . without driving me mad?"

She had sat down on a chair just inside the door, a little precisely, as though she were afraid he might lock it and keep her prisoner. She said: "But to-night, on the beach, when we were talking, you told me you preferred freedom. That we should both be free to end it—when we were—bored? Or didn't you imagine that I might want to go first?"

He came and knelt by her chair, putting his arms closely about her, kissing her lips, her throat. She sat quiet, unresisting, but unresponsive.

"I don't believe you really want to leave," he said. "It

isn't true. Not after all we have been to each other. You are angry with me, aren't you? Because I said that marriage would be a mistake? Women like that security. If that's what you want you can have it, Marilyn. There's nothing I won't do to keep you. There's no length I won't go to keep you. If you feel that marriage will make you happy and safe, let's get you divorced, and marry . . . it makes no difference, one way or the other, to me. It won't tie me to you any more firmly, and it won't make me love you any more or less."

She did not move, and presently his arms fell from about her. She said, rising: "Marriage with you is the last thing I should contemplate now, Lance."

"And you're going?"

"I'm going now."

"But you'll come back? After the film is finished, and Jose has gone home. We'll go down to the South of France, and get some more sunshine. You can't go back home now, Marilyn. You don't expect Jim to be waiting for you with open arms . . . not now he's left alone with Jean."

"Jean is coming with Jose to-morrow."

"Coming here?"

"Yes."

She went to the door. He followed her, catching her hand, pulling her round to him, trying to make the whole thing a light and teasing tiff that would soon be over, forgotten in renewed love-making. "Marilyn, when will you be back? To-morrow evening? When you have put Jose to bed? Will you creep up here then, to see me? Look at me. . . . Now smile. Now, tell me. How long will you be away?"

She said quietly: "I'll speak to you about it again, Lance. When I've had time to think everything over very clearly. It's difficult with you so near. But I don't *think* that I'll come back at all."

Marie called from below: "Madame, Pierre is here with the car."

"Good-bye, Lance," Marilyn said quickly. "I'll see you on the set to-morrow." She ran downstairs, swiftly and gracefully, and he heard the heels of her shoes click as she ran across the marble hall.

He went out on to the balcony over the front door and watched the car go through the gates, and the headlights slide away in two great beams down the hill. The balcony overlooked the courtyard entrance, the sea, and the long hill to the town, about a quarter of a mile away. The sound of the car vanished into the distant town noises, and it was very, very silent. He stood there alone, listening to the night noises. Someone walked slowly past the house in the direction of the town, and suddenly, as though remembering something, he went into the house. He could not bear the silence of it, the loneliness of it set apart on the cliff-side, away from the town. He went round the house, personally seeing that all the windows were closed and locked, and the shutters closed and barred. But for the fact that everyone would think he was running after Marilyn, he too would have gone down to the town, to the hotels, the noises of the harbour and cafés. This place was not lonely for two lovers . . . but for a man with uneasy memories it seemed unpleasantly isolated. When he heard Pierre bring the car in, he went to the front door and called to him, telling him he would be glad if he and Marie would sleep in the house itself, instead of in the gatehouse, while he was staying there. He felt better when he heard them come into the house.

Jean and Jose, looking almost of an age in their intense excitement, had their noses glued to the window as the plane flew across the French coast towards the airport. Ships and buoys and little islands. "St. Michael's Mount, Mont St. Michel!" Jose shouted, bouncing about until Jean thought she would rock the plane up and down. "'There's one in Cornwall too. We learned about it at school!"

Over harbours devastated by war, over shattered churches and rich farm country, over apple orchards and villages, down and down, and then with a little swoop and a gentle bump they had touched the earth again, and were gently taxi-ing up to the airport buildings.

"'There's Mummy, there's Mummy!" cried Jose, waving frantically, to the amusement of the other passengers.

"How gorgeous she is. How scrummy, how heavenly. . . . And, Jeany, look, she's got a dog!" Her eyes blazed, as though life was showering gifts on to her at an unbearable rate of delight. A holiday in France with her mother, her little actress's nose stuck curiously into the excitement of film-making for perhaps a whole week, a ride in an aeroplane—and now, perhaps, a dog. "Could it," she said, locking her hands, "could it, could it *possibly* be for me?"

Jean smiled, and said: "Calm down, Jackson, I expect it is! You've come here for a holiday. At this rate you must be losing weight by the minute. Don't burst with excitement. All right, you can get down now."

As the door was opened, and the steps were lowered, Jose burst out of the plane and flew past the airport officials, leaving Jean behind to collect their light luggage, straight across the tarmac into her mother's arms.

Jean followed, dealing patiently with her passports and the money regulations, collecting a porter and their luggage, and presently joined them. She stood a little way away, watching and smiling. Marilyn in her jeans, a yellow shirt, and her hair tied up in a red and yellow handkerchief, was kneeling by Jose, who held the wriggly, miniature chocolate-coloured poodle in her arms. The small, absurdly elegant bearded little dog caught the excitement with typical French enthusiasm and leapt and yapped, and licked Jose all over her face.

"Yes, he is yours," Marilyn was saying. "But when we go home he'll have to stay in quarantine for a long, long while. . . ."

Jean thought how typical and impractical and completely charming the gift was. She thought of the future heart-aches during the long period this treasure would be in quarantine, the difficulty of making inquiries, and making arrangements to go and see it. Marilyn could easily have bought Jose a dog on their return. And yet it would not have been the same—this was the perfect moment for the gift, to put Jose's tumbled little world right, and of course Marilyn, imaginative, romantic and inconsequential, had done the completely right thing. Jean thought again, as she had thought once before, that all Jose's adult life would be

lit by the memory of these absurd and beautiful generousities of Marilyn's.

As Jean came up, Marilyn rose to meet her, and Jose said, clutching the little dog in her skinny arms: "He *is* for me, he is for me and his name is Chocolat!"

Marilyn came forward. There was a brief hesitation, but they had been friends too long and the roots of their childhood had grown together, for any bad feeling to exist between them. They gave each other a self-conscious little hug, and Marilyn took out her handkerchief and blew her nose, and Jean felt the tears sting her eyes as she looked down at the delighted child and the dancing little dog.

"I suppose you think I'm completely mad," said Marilyn. "All those months of quarantine, and everything."

"I think you're completely mad," said Jean, smiling; "but your madnesses usually turn out to be exactly the right thing to do."

Marilyn looked at her quickly. "Usually?" Jean flushed quickly, and protested:

"Marilyn—I didn't mean anything else. . . ."

"I know, Jean." She drew her hand through her arm, and when she spoke she was laughing, but Jean noticed the laughter did not touch her eyes. "You know I'm one of those unconventional people who are very conventional at heart. If I do anything unconventional in a big way I'm very uncomfortable and touchy about it!"

Jean did not smile. "I guessed," she said gently, "that you might be."

"Well, come along. I have a car. We'll get back to the hotel and have some dinner." She took Jose by the hand, and led them to the car. "Say your prayers—this drive back is a far greater risk than anything anyone could experience in an airplane."

She was right, and Marilyn and Jose laughed, and Chocolat barked, and Jean held her breath as they were whisked over crossroads through herds of cattle, and round bends at an enormous speed, the driver with his thumb glued to the horn button, smiling gaily, talking in voluble French, making expansive gestures towards interesting scenery and never for a moment relaxing his speed. They passed the

château, its turrets and gilded angels rising high above the road.

"That's where we're working," said Marilyn, pointing, and Jean and Jose dipped their heads to stare up the wooded cliff at the fairytale structure above.

"Havers, it's a wee bit decorated," said Jean, and Marilyn suddenly giggled, tightening her hands on their arms. She had missed them. Heavens, *how* she had missed them. She did not realise what it would be like without them all, without the silly family jokes, the small family turmoils; and Jean's quizzically cocked grey eye, and brief but apt comment, brought it all back. . . . The big bedroom at Riverhouse, and Jim dancing the dying swan before going to his surgery. Jim! Jim, when she went away, looking so lost, so lonely. How had she forgotten that he could be silly, and gallant and gay?

The hotel where they were staying was a long, low rambling building, painted with the curious French inspiration for colours, in pale grey and pink. There was a terraced café looking out over a garden of fine dusty gravel and huge cedar trees. Some steps went down a small overhanging cliff to the beach, and from the terrace there were picturesque and rather self-consciously paintable views of the harbour and the old castle fortress. Marilyn led the way upstairs.

"I've had a small bed put in my room for Jose," she said. Jose flashed her a look of sheer adoration, which made them both laugh, meeting each other's glance.

"Sometimes she's so like you, I think you ought to do a double act on the music halls," said Jean.

"I know. When—when I've been effectively dramatic, I often see her looking at me, and it brings me up short. It stops me acting on and off the stage—the knowledge that Jose will try it out on Dilly, or the baker's roundsman, or some unsuspecting teacher at school," she said. Jose had rushed on into the bedroom. "You're here, next door, Jean. There's the dinner gong, now. Just wash and powder your nose. . . . No one dresses here. All the company are staying here—except Lance. He's by himself at a small villa farther along the cliff. . . ." She avoided Jean's direct glance.

Jean said quietly, brushing her shining copper hair to rights : " Where's—where's Mr. Lowitz staying ? "

" Oh, Phil's staying here with the rest. He's very democratic for a director. He's not often in to dinner until late, though. He stays with his camera boys, getting special shots of the château in the evening light, when everyone else has gone."

They went down to dinner, and were introduced to Lacey and Sir Matthew, and one or two other members of the company who were present. Jose opened her eyes in horror and surprise at being served some crayfish, like overgrown shrimps with bristling whiskers and fierce little faces. Marilyn ordered her a plain omelette and salad, and gave her a teaspoonful of wine in her water, and Chocolat sat up on a chair beside her, and she felt very important and grown up and continental. Lakin came in late, paused in surprise when he saw Jose sitting there, his strange, thin, rather distinguished face strangely agitated. He came slowly across and greeted them, looking as though he were fascinated by the pretty, dark-haired, blue-eyed little girl, so like her mother, sitting up so proudly, and feeling so very grown up.

" I didn't know you had a little girl, Miss Falaise," he said, when the introductions had been completed. He did not, like the rest of the company, fall into the easy-going habit of Christian names.

" I have two little girls and a little boy," Marilyn said quickly.

" Our profession parts children from their parents," said Lakin in his quick, dry voice. " When you are working, or touring, they are growing up among strangers, and then, when they are grown, you do not know them."

Marilyn looked up, a little startled. He had hardly spoken to her before, and now he seemed curiously agitated and in earnest. She said : " I intend Jose to live with me."

" And the others ? "

" The others are different."

" They are not," he said violently. " Children are not different. They believe in people. They must believe in the right people. When they have only one parent it is hard. . . ."

Something made Marilyn say, she did not know why, perhaps to calm his obvious and apparent distress : " My children have their father too, Mr. Lakin." And met Jean's eyes, flushed, glanced away, and hurriedly changed the subject, hoping to get away from so near and dangerous a subject. " How did things go to-day up at the château ? "

" Very well, I believe." The agitated expression went out of Lakin's eyes, and he seemed calmer. " I believe Mr. Lowitz had all the dancing scenes he wanted in the can."

" Oh, that's fine. You should be murdering me to-morrow or the next day, and to-morrow morning he's going to work Lance and I on our final scenes."

" That means that Mr. Saxelby may be finishing to-morrow ? "

" Phil hopes so."

" Will he stay—in France, I mean—until the rest of the company return ? "

Marilyn hesitated—originally she and Lance had planned to travel south together, and have some weeks in the sun before returning to England. Now she did not know. She did not know what he wished to do, and she did not know what she wished to do. Yes, she did. She would not travel with Lance while Jose was with her. She knew that now. She lifted her chin, and said indifferently : " I don't know. I shouldn't think so. He'll probably go down to the Riviera, or fly back to London. I should not imagine he'd hang around here longer than necessary."

" Oh. . . ." Lakin was silent, and then, as though suddenly recollecting himself, gave his formal little bow. " I must get along now . . . but if you will permit me." He took out his wallet, and out of the wallet a fold of cotton-wool, in which was wrapped carefully a child's old-fashioned silver bracelet, hung with little bells. " A little gift for the young lady." He laid it by Jose's plate. Jose, her mouth full, stared, too overcome by delight to be polite.

" No, really, Mr. Lakin, you shouldn't," Marilyn protested quickly ; the trinket was so charming, so obviously some family keepsake.

" I insist. It gives me much pleasure. Good night."

He bowed again, and walked out of the dining-room.

"That's a queer fish," said Jean gravely. "Very nice and kind, but not quite normal, do you think?"

Marilyn lifted the little silver bracelet, and fastened it round Jose's thin little wrist. The tiny bells made curious little fairy chimes. She frowned, puzzled. "He is queer, but nice, as you say. He's hardly spoken to me before—except to say good morning, or good evening. He keeps to himself, and yet . . . he always seems to be there. But there's no doubt about his acting. Phil Lowitz is certainly a genius at casting. He just doesn't even consider names, stars, drawing power. He casts as he thinks the story demands, knowing his name will draw the crowds. And Lakin is magnificent. It's not a very big part, but it's very important. You wouldn't recognise him, Jean, in his shabby old-fashioned Breton clothes . . . his accent is so authentic, and somehow he gives, just by looking at Sir Matthew, a feeling of absolutely fanatical devotion. . . ."

She paused, and looked up, realising that Jean was not listening. She was sitting in the corner, right next to the long open window. Through the pine trees the setting sun blazed down on her bright copper hair, her simple corn-yellow dress, the link of red amber round her throat. She was sitting quite still, looking out into the courtyard, where a coach had just driven in, and Phil Lowitz and his camera crew were unloading themselves and their gear.

Phil turned, as though under a compulsion, and saw Jean, and stood there, his thin dark face suddenly illuminated, caught completely off his guard. It was as though, across the space and stones between them, they reached across and touched hands.

Marilyn sat dumbfounded with astonishment. She had imagined that Jim and Jean were necessary to each other. And here, in this unguarded moment, were Jean—and Phil, obviously, to anyone with the slightest perception, fathoms deep in love.

CHAPTER 7

MARILYN DREW in a long, trembling breath. It seemed to her that she was learning a lot about herself, and everyone. She said to Jean: "It's nearly eight—you go out and order coffee in the garden, and I'll put Jose to bed. I shan't be long."

"Where is Chocolat going to sleep?" asked Jose eagerly. "Can he sleep with me?"

"Well, not exactly. I've had a box put in my little dressing-room. Come on now, chicken, say good night to Jean."

Jose stood up obediently and lifted her face for Jean's good-night kiss. Her small face was quite beatified. Jean smiled and hugged her. "Happy now, Jackson?" she asked. "Everything you want?"

"Everything in the world, except . . ." She paused. "It would be perfect if Daddy were here and the twins." Jean glanced a little uncertainly at Marilyn, and saw her teeth catch her lower lip, but Jose went on thoughtlessly: "Daddy would love it. But you know the twins don't really care so long as there's plenty of sand. They'll be just as happy with Granny."

Marilyn and Jean laughed, her words brought back such a vivid picture of the two sturdy little figures in scarlet swimming shorts, digging away with the utmost content and unity. To Jose, ecstatic with the delight of a foreign country, grown-up dinner, the ownership of the charming and exotic Chocolat, and best of all "sleeping with Mummy," their conservative preference for sand castles was incomprehensible.

"Can I come and see you act to-morrow?" she demanded.

"I don't think so," said Marilyn. She caught Jean's eyes and shook her head gently. "After breakfast you can come and see the château and watch me make up, and see me in my costume, and then Jean and you can borrow one of the cars for the day."

Jose's face fell a little, and Marilyn said: "There are lots of exciting things to see. A very old little town on an island in the middle of the harbour, with great big walls, and little narrow streets full of shops, all full of pretty things, and lots of exciting smells for Chocolat."

"Can I buy presents for everyone at home?" asked Jose.

Again Marilyn hesitated. She put out her arms, and suddenly hugged Jose against her, as though she would hide those wide inquiring eyes. Jose had overheard her saying she would not return to Riverhouse, but she did not really believe it. The very fact that she and Jim had arranged this wonderful trip for her made her sure that everything was all right.

"I'd like to buy something quite gorgeous for Dilly," said Jose. "So you should," said Jean, smiling. "The way she puts up with your nonsense."

"Tell her she must go to bed, Jean," implored Marilyn. "She is going to talk me out of it in a moment."

It was a little gesture of conciliation. As though Marilyn had put out her hand in friendship.

"Go to bed, Snooks," said Jean, "or Mummy will be tired in the morning and not be able to act properly." Jose, an actress to the soul, understood this appeal far more than any command to do as she was told, and allowed Marilyn to carry her off without another word, Chocolat following like a high-stepping little brown pony.

Jean went out into the garden, and sat at one of the little green iron tables under the cedar trees, waiting for the waitress to bring the coffee. Phil had not come into the dining-room. He had gone straight up to his room, without making any attempt to greet her.

The sun had gone now, although the light was still lovely over the sea. The myriad little lights warning of reefs and rocks flashed and winked over the bay, and the sardine boats were moving silently out of the harbour, their red and green lights creeping over the water. Behind the town, behind the far-piled towers of the château, there was a misty radiance where the moon was rising. The guests who were staying at the hotel sat about at the little tables, talking and taking their coffee, and nearby Sir Matthew and Lacey Holmes

were playing a game of gin-runmy. She did not realise Phil was standing beside her until she heard the soft crunch of a step on the gravel and heard him say: "Hallo, Jean. . . ."

She turned quickly, her heart in her eyes, and said eagerly: "Hallo."

"May I sit here for a minute? Will you have a drink?" She refused, but he called the waitress and ordered himself an aperitif, for he had not been into dinner. "I did not know until yesterday that you were coming."

"I didn't know myself until the day you all flew out. Then Jim asked me to come and look after Jose until Marilyn goes back to England."

He said slowly: "He's very—fond of you, isn't he?"

She glanced up, a little surprised. "Jim? Why, yes, I hope so. I think they all are. . . . And I'm awfully fond of them. They were all so—so right for each other, and so happy. That's why it's so awful to me that this should have happened. . . ."

Marilyn came from the house, and at the same time the waitress brought their coffee, telling Phil that his dinner was served, and the other gentlemen were waiting. He rose with an apology, left them and went into the dining-room, and Marilyn sat down and poured the coffee.

"She tucked down after a great many cuddles and protestations of love. Chocolat was put in his box, but I've no doubt that by the time I go up, either he'll be on the bed with Jose, or Jose will be in the box with him."

"Who are the 'other gentlemen' whom Phil is dining with?"

"Oh, his camera boys. He eats with them every night, and they have a post-mortem over the takes, and make plans for the next day's shooting. That's one of his successes, he works so closely with his crew." She handed Jean her coffee, Jean took it, stirring it absently. Through the long windows of the dining-room she could see the men sitting at a long table, hear scraps of their conversation. She could see Phil's thin alert face, turning from one to the other, encouraging them to talk. She thought: "He's terribly clever, and I'm very good at looking after clever people." And felt her face burn at the thought, and was grateful that

the falling light, and the deep shadows of the trees, hid her face.

"Jean," said Marilyn, "what are you going to do when you go back to London?"

Jean glanced up at her swiftly, and said: "I shall look for another job. I've actually answered one or two advertisements already."

"You mean—you won't go back to Riverhouse?"

"Why, no, of course not. I'm not needed there without you and the children. Dilly will easily be able to manage with only Jim."

"Has Jim spoken at all about what he intends to do?"

"Yes," said Jean. "He'll close most of the house—because you will want your furniture, he says, when you find a flat. And he thinks he'll be able to afford a nanny for the twins—they'll stay with their grandmother, of course, down at Whitesands, and he'll go down at week-ends. I think I'll get a nice quiet job in an orphanage, hospital or mental institution. It will be restful after Riverhouse."

Marilyn did not laugh. She was thinking of Riverhouse, with its tall lovely rooms closed, with dust sheets draping the furniture. She was thinking of Jim, working all day, coming back to that lonely, echoing house.

"Jim will be lonely," she said involuntarily.

Jean said quietly: "But I cannot do anything about that."

"Won't you ever see him?" Marilyn's voice was almost a whisper, and now the light had faded until Jean could not see her face.

"Of course," said Jean in frank, blank surprise, "I hope I'll often see him. Why shouldn't I? I hope I'll see you too." She paused, in a flash of revelation, and as always, when she was very much moved, all the Scot in her rose to the surface. "You didn't think I was in love with him myself, did you, Merry?"

There was a queer, muffled little sound in the darkness, and Merry put her hands over her eyes. In a moment Jean with her quick instinct to comfort was at her side. She drew the long beautiful hands down, holding them firmly in her own square, steady, little paws.

"Merry, Merry, don't cry. Everybody does silly things, and thinks silly things at times. If you really thought that, it isn't any sillier than Jim believing you don't love him any more."

"Does he? Perhaps he was right, for a while. Oh, Jeany." Jean knelt at her side and put her arms round her. Under the darkness of the trees they were hidden from the other guests. "Jeany, I've made such a mess of everything. Before, it was so hopeless, I was so awful at running things. I knew I was neglecting Jim and the children, and the house was always in such a mess, and even if I had given up my own work, I don't think it would have been much better."

"There, there," said Jean, exactly as though she were talking to Jose. "Jim was always telling you you couldn't be wonderful at everything. He used to laugh at you. . . ."

"Why can't I learn to laugh at myself? Why must I always imagine things, and be dramatic?"

"It's your job."

Marilyn was quiet suddenly. "Perhaps it isn't all imagination, Jeany. I asked you to come so that Jim and the children would have all the things I couldn't give them, and when you did it, so awfully well, I thought you and he were falling in love, and there was no place left for me. But—even if you're not in love, perhaps there is no place. . . . Perhaps I was right about that?"

Jean's hands closed about her head, warm, comforting little hands, holding her gently by the ears, shaking the delicate head from side to side. It was a gesture she often used to Jose, a sort of affectionate burlesque of an impatient shake. A reproving mixture of exasperation and love.

"Don't be so daft, Merry. Jim's eating his heart out for you. Say the word and I'll go in there and put a call through to London, and you can speak to him. . . . Jim's no fool, and he loves you, he'll understand."

Marilyn's face was white. "But don't you see, Jean, *I can't*. I haven't the right to ask him to take me back. Not now. . . . Don't you understand, it's too late."

Marilyn did not sleep. She lay awake listening to the night sounds, the lap of the waves, and the chug of a motor

out in the bay, the cocks that tore the night with their raucous cries. She remembered a French lesson from her childhood, about *Le Coque Gaulois*, the Herald of the Dawn, bringing enlightenment to all nations. At four-thirty, half an hour before she had to rise, she had other and more destructive thoughts about this national emblem. They crowed at fifteen-minute intervals after midnight, and every time she drifted into a troubled sleep they recalled her sharply to consciousness, to Jose's quiet breathing, and to Chocolat's occasional snores and her own tormenting thoughts. To herself, and Jim and Lance, and this thing she had done, this stupid, reckless, foolish, final thing.

She could not bear to think of Lance. She could not bear it. She had gone to him in her doubt and distress and unhappiness, not because she loved him, not because he could give her comfort or advice, but because his vivid masculine attraction whipped her blood to a flame, and she had used that flame as other people might use drink or drugs. So she would not think. She felt her cheeks burn hotly, lying there in the dark. A purely sensual indulgence? Perhaps? Perhaps an unconscious form of revenge on Jim and Jean, those calm, sensible ones who had not wanted her . . . whom she had thought had not wanted her. Often in her life there had been difficulties, but always before she had gone like a child to Jim, pouring out all her thoughts and all her troubles, her ambitions, her imaginative hopes and fears, listening while he examined them all, laughing at her absurdities, showing her that nearly all her fears were of her own making, and would fade when they were looked at squarely, making life easy for her, making it brave and gay. If only she had gone to him this time—right at first, but because for the first time it was Jim himself whom she had thought she was losing, she could not speak to him. She turned restlessly through the long night, her mind and body in a sickened revulsion at what she had done. She was glad when towards four o'clock Jose awoke, and said: "Want a drink, please," and she had to get up and get her some water. It was even better when she followed this up with a tentative: "Can I come in your bed?"

Marilyn snatched her up eagerly, and settled her down in

the big bed, and in a few minutes she was fast asleep again, her nose tucked into her mother's shoulder, and with the light, warm burden in her arms Marilyn felt more at peace. She had not lost everything . . . there was still Jose, and her unquestioning, touching love. As the sky began to pale towards dawn, she fell into a brief uneasy sleep.

The chambermaid came along the corridor at five o'clock rapping at the doors of the film people. Jean had not really to get up then, but knew Jose would be wide-awake as soon as her mother stirred. She and Marilyn met in the bathroom, which lay between their bedrooms. Marilyn sat in the bath, holding the cold water spray over her shoulders, trying to shock herself awake, while Jean washed at the basin. Without either of them knowing it they had both slipped back into the old, intimately casual dormitory friendship of their schooldays.

"I gather you want me to whisk Jose off before they start rolling to-day?" Jean asked, holding up a long swag of copper hair and washing the back of her neck. In her briefs and bras she was as neat and trim as a little sailing ship. She began to clean her teeth, watching Marilyn through the glass, noting the white face, and the heavy dark shadows beneath her eyes, but wisely not mentioning them.

"Yes. She can come and see the château, and see us all made up, but all the scenes are very grown-up and dramatic, and not at all the sort of stuff for her to watch."

"Such as?"

"Oh, Lakin has to murder me, and there's one very hectic scene with Lance"—a little shudder passed over her—"a love scene that develops into a quarrel and mutual accusations. It's all rather a morbid story."

Jean soaped her face so that Marilyn could not see her expression. "All Phil's stories seem to be like that—magnificent morbid dramas. I wonder when he'll produce something really happy."

"When he's happy himself," said Marilyn quietly, and noted with a certain satisfaction that the tips of Jean's ears suddenly went very pink indeed.

They had breakfast, the three of them and Chocolat, Jose loving the thick sweet chocolate and crisp brioche, and

afterwards they drove out to Château Benodet, and the custodian who escorted parties in normal times, when the fantastic edifice was not infested with a film company, took Jean and Jose over the whole place. Jose was delighted, it was like a castle from a fairytale. They looked down from the topmost turret and saw the actors far down below in the gravelled forecourt, and the cameramen unloading their gear from a lorry, tiny figures far below in the shadow of the great encircling chestnuts.

Marilyn came down the steps in her white muslin crinoline, with some white flowers in her hair, followed by Lacey in the decorous black and white apron and tall Breton bonnet of her serving maid. Sir Matthew Miles had finished his work yesterday evening, and was leaving for England this morning. Lakin came down the steps from the dressing-rooms in the blue smock and wide black hat of a peasant. Phil in his white shirt, his hair a moving black spot in the courtyard, was talking to one of his camera crew.

"Mummy, Mummy," yelled Jose; "look up, look up. I'm up here."

All the faces below turned up like pansies to the sun, and Chocolat, banned with all dogs from entering the castle, went frantic and bounded about the courtyard, barking hysterically. They saw Phil pick him up, and hold him up pretending he was waving a paw up at Jose. She shrieked with joy, and Jean clutched her short skirt tightly.

"Let's go down and see Mummy. She's got her lovely frilly dress on. What are we going to do to-day? Have you got some money for presents? . . . Oh, come on, Jean. . . ." She tugged at her hand, and Jean turned from the battlements. Below in the courtyard a car had driven in, and she had recognised the white-gold gleam of Saxelby's blond head as he had alighted, already made up and dressed in a pale grey waisted frock-coat of the period, a snowy cravat at his throat, the long elegant trousers clipped below the instep. He had paused a moment and then crossed to Marilyn's side. It was the first time Jean had seen him since they had arrived.

They went down, calling and running down the spiral staircase, and came out of an arched door on to the terrace.

Chocolat chased across to meet them. Lance was still talking earnestly to Marilyn. Jean could see his eyes intently on her face, and as they came out into the sunshine, Marilyn suddenly jerked her hand free, and came over, passing Lakin and Lacey, to speak to Jose.

"You can go to the beach in Mr. Saxelby's car. It has to go back to the garage, anyway," she said, her arm going round Jose's shoulder. She looked nervous and distressed, so much so that Jean said quickly:

"Aren't you well, Merry?"

"I had a wretched night. Have you enough money, Jean? Look, here are four thousand francs, that's for your lunch and anything else you may need during the day. If you spend the afternoon on the Sable d'Or Plage, I'll come and pick you up about five. It's cleaner than the town beach—and the beach here is private and very lonely."

"Can Chocolat swim?" asked Jose.

"I should think so—you'd better try him."

Jean looked round the lower courtyard as they went down the last flight of shallow stone steps to the car, Marilyn lifting her crinoline, and automatically walking with the small steps that impart to those voluminous garments their graceful skimming motion. At the far end of the terrace, where the cliff curved inwards almost to the house, was a charming little stone summer-house, not quite making up its mind whether to be Greek or Gothic, its slender columns laced about with a gnarled wisteria vine. The camera crew were busy setting up their gear under Phil's supervision. Lacey was knitting in one of the sunny corners nearby, with Lakin sitting near her. Lance was walking quickly and silently up and down the terrace with his quick, light panther's tread, the sunlight gleaming on his bright, pale hair.

Jean had put on one of her new dresses, a striped lavender gingham, with a sun-top and little jacket. Marilyn watched her grey eyes glance down the terrace, and a little laugh rose in her heart. Jean in love was so very different from the capable and competent Jean who had run Riverhouse on oiled wheels. She turned and caught Marilyn's glance, and flushed.

"Why don't you go along and say hallo?" said Marilyn mischievously, but at that moment Lance came quickly down to them. There was a curious air of tautness about him, and for once his eyes had lost their usual admiring and predatory gleam. For once the expression which Jean called unflatteringly his "tom-cat" look was not there.

As he drew near Marilyn stepped back a little, swinging her wide skirts infinitesimally so that they would not touch him, and Jose ran up with Chocolat, throwing her arms round her mother's waist. Chocolat danced about their heels, barking joyfully. Suddenly Lance put out his hand, and took Jose's arm, looking at the little bracelet on her wrist, with its turquoise-studded silver bells.

"Where did you get this?" he said.

Jose, a little scared by his expression, said defensively: "That nice old man gave it me." She pointed down the terrace to where Lakin was talking to Lacey Holmes. To Jose he was very, very old.

Lance was quite silent for a moment, then he said irritably: "I hope you're going to take that damned dog away with you. We shall all be driven crazy with its barking while we work." He dropped her hand abruptly, and walked on towards the summer-house.

Jean stared. "What's the matter with him?" she said bluntly. "He looks as though he's seen a ghost."

Marilyn saw them into the car, Jose waving violently until they were out of sight. As it turned the corner, Phil called her from the summer-house, and as she turned towards him Lance was by her side again. She moved away but he caught her arm with a swift urgency.

"Marilyn, I've got to speak with you."

"Phil's ready to start," she said quickly.

"He can wait. . . . I've got to speak with you. I should finish shooting to-night, and I'm going straight on to the Riviera. Are you coming with me?"

She knew suddenly that it was important to him. That he had wanted her before, but now the fact that he was losing her was unbearable. There was an urgency and a need about him which was quite new and different, and frightened her a little. Passion had swept by her like a

hurricane, leaving her curiously cold and clear-thinking. She knew that as she withdrew from him, so his desire for her increased. She knew the unplumbable depths of his vanity, that made it appalling to him that any woman should willingly leave him before he should tire of her. And yet there was something else . . . something unspoken. Some curious deep appeal which she did not understand in the words. "I've got to speak to you," and the eager grasp on her arm.

Phil called from the terrace again, and she made a move to withdraw her arm. "I'll speak to you later, Lance. We must go now."

"You're not coming . . . you're leaving me? Is it because of that child? Is it because you just don't want to come? Marilyn . . . will you answer."

She knew everyone was watching them.

"Lance, I can't now. Everyone is watching. . . . Please don't make a scene."

"Well, will you meet me to-night? Down on the beach where we were the other evening? To-night, when we have finished."

"All right," she said impatiently; "about five. . . . I'll send a car for Jose and Jean. I can't stay, though. I must be back at the hotel for dinner." She waved quickly to Phil, who was limping down the terrace towards them. "All right . . . we're coming. . . ."

It was a long and very tiring morning. The quarrel with Lance finished, there was the murder scene. Marilyn had to make her way to the little summer-house, the cameras following every darting and secretive movement as she crossed the terrace, to where Lakin was hiding in one of the niches in the wall. There was a brief, violent scene where Lakin strangled her, dropping the body across the floor. Phil put extra lights outside, to increase the shafts of sunlight falling across the floor between the columns where she had to fall, and Lance had to find her there, and lift her in his arms as the cameras faded out. By lunch-time Marilyn had been killed about a dozen times, and a dozen times sat under the make-up girl's hands to have her hair smoothed, and her make up repaired, or a stitch put in where Lakin

had accidentally torn her flounce. She smiled at him as he stood near, watching the girl combing her curls back into shining smoothness. He was a wonderful actor. It was amazing the way he could spring from this quiet, attentive watchfulness to an almost fiendish fury . . . and yet he handled her gently. The scene was rough and violent, and Phil hoped would be terrifying ; yet his hands on her throat, forcing back her head, were gentle, leaving no mark or bruise. The scene which was holding them up was Lance's part . . . it was very brief, but very important, and to-day there was a curious, unimaginative woodenness about him that Phil could not shake, which drove him wild with impatience. He had tried patience, sarcasm, and had even lost his temper, but he still had not taken a satisfactory shot of the scene. In despair he had called a break for lunch, and had driven off to a little café a mile down the road.

Marilyn said smilingly : " Thank you for strangling me so gently, Mr. Lakin. I once played Desdemona in rep. and had my throat in bandages for a fortnight after."

He smiled politely at her compliment, and said in his curious, stilted old-fashioned way : " One does not like to alarm the ladies. It's a trick, you know. We old hands had to learn them thoroughly."

" I should imagine you did," chimed in Lacey, " with the *Murders in Red Barn* and *George Barnwell's* that you used to play. Hurry up, Marilyn, here's the coach to take us to lunch."

Marilyn went in and changed her voluminous skirts for a short cotton dress, keeping on her heavy make-up, and tying a handkerchief round her elaborately dressed hair. To her relief, Lance was not there when she came out, and there was only herself, Lacey and the script and make-up girls, besides Phil and the camera men, in the coach. They waited a little, but as Lance did not appear, drove off without him.

" He's a bit exclusive these days, he's probably gone by car," said Lacey. When they reached the café, Marilyn went across and sat down by Phil. He looked up wearily and began as soon as she sat down.

" What on earth's got into Lance ? " he asked. " I always

knew he couldn't act, but he's always fairly sympathetic to direction. He's behaving like a moron."

Marilyn took the menu, and ordered herself an omelette and some salad, and said vaguely: "It isn't as bad as all that, surely?"

"Bad?" Phil ran his thin brown hands through his thick dark hair. "He's supposed to come into that summer-house and find you dead. The fatal woman for whom he has sacrificed honour, wealth, career and a pure love—the woman who possesses him body and soul. And he behaves just as though he's called for the laundry."

In spite of everything Marilyn gave a little spurt of laughter. "He's certainly a bit nervous."

"Nervous? He's petrified. He's crazy to finish to-day, and get away either this evening or early to-morrow. He can't go unless this take is right. I've told him that, and yet he doesn't seem to be able to get it right." He paused, prodded his salad disconsolately, and said suddenly: "Is there something wrong between you two?"

Marilyn looked up quickly. She said without thinking: "Yes. Everything. It's finished."

"Oh," Phil paused. "I can't imagine . . ." he began, and stopped.

"You can't imagine the loss of a lady putting Lance off his stroke," she said quickly. "I think you're right there."

They ate in silence for a few minutes, and Phil filled her glass from his bottle of red wine, watching her closely as he did so. She looked very strange and exotic in her simple cotton frock, her heavy make-up, and her hair piled up with Victorian luxuriance of ringlets and curls. He said deliberately: "Are you going back to Jim?"

Her hands dropped helplessly into her lap, and the tears rose to her eyes. "Phil, how can I? Even supposing he would . . . even supposing he still wants me, what kind of a life would it be? What sort of peace would he have, knowing I threw myself into the arms of a . . ."

"Handsome fool?" he suggested.

"If you like . . . but he's not quite that. There's something more dangerous than any man can realise about Lance. But for what reason did I do it? A little doubt, a

worthless suspicion. How would he ever be able to believe in me again?"

Phil's mouth curled, and he touched her arm, bringing her up short. "You did it because whatever you would take from another man, you would never take second place with Jim." She drew in a sharp little breath, and he went on: "I think you lack faith in your love."

"I do? Haven't I reason? What about you? You haven't any faith in your love, or yourself either," she flared at him. "Why the devil don't you ask Jean to marry you and put the girl out of her misery."

He went white under his tan, and the black eyes suddenly burned. "What are you wishing on the poor child? A man ten years her senior, moody, temperamental, with a beastly temper. . . ."

"And humorous, and brilliant, and very, very kind," said Marilyn. "And very, very honest."

"And lame."

"Do you think if Jean loves you she will notice whether you're halt and blind as well? Have you thought what it would be to you to have someone like her to love you? Do you want to turn her into a busy, anxious old maid, working all her life looking after other people's houses, husbands and children. Because that's what will happen to her. I turned to a second-best because, as you said, Phil, I'm vain--vain to my fingertips. But Jean isn't; she's in love with you, and if you don't take her, there'll never be another man."

They were silent, the food on the table untouched between them.

He said huskily: "You thought she was in love with Jim. Saxelby thought so too. What made you think differently?"

"Jean herself. She said to me, 'I'm not needed there without you and the children'—and then, I saw her face when she was looking at you. You see"—she paused, trying hard to tell him the truth she had seen so clearly—"Jean and Jim are essentially good people. I don't mean priggish good. Their—their need in life is to look after other people. Look how she looked after us, all, and how Jim looks after his patients . . . and me. They were so alike, I thought

they must be meant for each other, when I felt so useless. But it's not true. I thought that, and heaven help me, I couldn't imagine any woman who knew Jim's worth not wanting him. Vanity again. But they temperamentally want someone who needs their help and loving kindness, they"—her voice broke a little—"they are the menders, the comforters, and they need people like you and I, Phil, just as you and I, much more desperately, need people like them."

He was touched by her humility, her hard-won understanding. His thin, sensitive hand touched hers. He said: "You're right, Merry, I do love her very much."

Marilyn pulled her hand away in a flash of temper. "Then, for Heaven's sake, man, all you've got to do is ask her. If I'm wrong, she'll turn you down. But that's not the end of the world."

He laughed at her impatience. Her quickness to help other people, when she could so rarely help or advise herself.

"Phil, when we finish to-night, I've promised to see Lance. I want to tell him it's all finished. If I'm to make anything at all of my life, I've got to start being honest—with myself and other people. But I said I would take a car and collect Jean and Jose from the Sable d'Or Plage. Will you go for me?"

The mischievous smile touched his lips, making him look young and very attractive. "Bullied into matrimony by my leading lady," he said. "Yes, Merry, I'll go. And thank you, my dear."

They drove back to the château, and the long, weary work began again. It was hot, a cloudless blue sky blazing above, the stillness of leaf and air bringing about a sort of lethargy so that even Marilyn found herself moving automatically through this important and dramatic scene. Her own work was finally shot, and she lay on the floor, her voluminous skirts and dishevelled hair spread about her, her eyes half-closed, watching a ladybird walk along the edge of one of the paving stones in the floor, the voices of the crew and other actors above her.

It was late, and everyone's tempers and nerves were getting a little frayed, when Lakin suggested with his usual

grave rather old-fashioned courtesy that he and Miss Holmes should withdraw. They were not needed for the scene, and perhaps Mr. Saxelby would work better without onlookers. Marilyn propped her head on her elbow, and looked up at Lance, to see how he would take this suggestion. She saw the strained, taut lines in his face relax with relief.

Phil shrugged, and said carelessly: "O.K. If it suits you. This has got to be right before you can leave, Lance." They all waited, and had a cigarette, Marilyn sitting on the ground in the circle of her frothing petticoats, until Lakin and Lacey Holmes had taken their departure. Then Phil said:

"All right. Now let's get it. Lie down, Merry. Props—spread her hair a bit. That's fine. . . . The dress off the one shoulder, Merry . . . and let's have some dark marks on her throat. Shut your eyes, Merry, and be dead still. We don't pick you up much, it's Lance we're taking, but if we do, try not to breathe. . . . Come along, Lance. All right, boys, get them rolling. . . ."

It moved to its close as smoothly as silk. At the cut everybody breathed with relief. It was nearly five. As Marilyn went to her dressing-room to change, Lance stopped at her side. He looked more at ease than he had all day.

"I'll see you down on the beach? In about ten minutes."

"I can't stay—I have to be back at the hotel for dinner."

"All right. I can't talk to you here, anyway. There always seems someone around. I'll go and change now."

Marilyn took off her make-up with relief, and changed into her cool summer frock. The great crinoline had been unbearably hot and cumbersome. She told Phil to stop the car and wait for her on the road, when he brought the others back from the Sable d'Or beach, and went quickly through the overgrown gardens of the château, along a path leading through a wood, where the pines slowly dwindled as they approached the dunes and the private beach where she and Lance had swum and dined. There was something eerie about the castle in the hot late afternoon sunshine. The queer, sinister quality which Phil had noticed from the first, and picked as an ideal background for his dark and passionate story, was intensified. On a blowy day when leaves and air

and sea were all dancing with light it was quite different—it was the stillness and silence that were so sinister. As she stood there she was conscious of a curious disinclination to go any farther. She could not explain it, she did not try. It rose within her like panic, although she told herself that of course she must go on down the dunes and meet Lance she still stood there, unable to force herself to go farther. The sun shone on the blue sea through the pine trees, and she could still hear the shouts of the bathers and the children on the beach beyond the barrier of rocks. Everything was very calm, and very beautiful, and very, very quiet. That was it, she told herself feverishly. The quietness. There was something unnatural about it . . . no birds singing, the little waves falling soundlessly on the shore. She was being ridiculous. This was a private beach, there were no people, and consequently no noise. And then, very clear and sharp, just as it had been when she had been there before, with Lance's arms about her on their last evening together, came the snapping of a twig.

In sheer blind reasonless panic she turned, and ran back again, away from the dunes and the rocks and the quiet little wood towards the château. Her one thought was to get away as quickly as possible. She ran quickly, her black hair streaming behind her, reaching the courtyard just as the last coach turned away into the road. She sat down on the steps, gasping for breath, trying to collect her thoughts. Lance's hired car was still there. She went over to it and tried the handles, but it was locked. The château was locked up now too, for the caretaker did not stay there at night. He went round barring and shuttering the ground floor windows, and then cycled away to his home in the village. No one would come until Phil and Jean and Jose came back to pick her up. How long would they be? It took about twenty minutes to motor round the main road to Sable d'Or and twenty minutes back. But then Phil had to find them—and then he might be some while talking. How long did it take a man like Phil to tell a girl like Jean he loved her?

She smiled, and the panic lessened. Lance was waiting for her on the beach. She was not afraid of him. What was

she afraid of? Of the scene that might take place? His anger? She had to be honest with him, if she was going to start being honest with herself. She had to go and tell him that she had made a terrible mistake. That she was not the sort of person whose love and unhappiness could be forgotten in a new and passionate affair. She had been attracted to him, physically, because he was a very attractive man, and she had tried to make herself think it was important. It was not. If he pursued her as he had done before, if he made love to her, perhaps she might not resist him, but always she would know, when the waves of passion receded, that in her heart she did not even like him, and she would be ashamed. She would ask him to forgive her, and go away, out of her life, and leave her alone.

That was what she had to do.

She rose to her feet, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her cotton dress, and started to walk determinedly back towards the beach. As she went she wondered why Lance had not become impatient, and set out to find her. He would have heard the coach drive away, and know that by now the château would be deserted. Patience was never one of his characteristics. But there was no sign of him, and the wood was just as quiet, and the feeling of premonition and dread increased at every step she forced herself to take towards the dunes.

As she drew near she called, unable to bear the silence: "Lance! Are you there? Lance!"

A flock of seabirds rose from the beach, uttering their mournful cries, and the rocks that divided the château beach from Sable d'Oor returned her voice back mockingly in soft, whispering echoes.

CHAPTER 8

PHIL TOOK the hired car which Marilyn had engaged, and drove back to the village, dropping the chauffeur there before turning back on his tracks, passing the château again as he took the main coast road round to Sable d'Or. He was going for Jean, and his lean, hard body and normally cool brain were pulsing with excitement. He certainly had not wanted anyone with him, least of all the chauffeur, whose round blue Breton eyes stared at all the "film actors" with unconcealed curiosity. This new fashion of making films in natural settings might be exciting on celluloid, but in practice it brought a crowd of would-be discoveries buzzing hopefully around the company all the time they were on location. And to-night he did not want to think about films, or of anything but Jean. The very thought of her name told him what she had come to mean to him, and what a queer torment the past weeks, when he had tried to put her out of his mind, had been.

It had been a pretty futile attempt, and as he drove along the winding, tree-clad road, he wondered why he had ever tried? Because she was so young? Because he was lame? Because he had been so long alone and independent of all emotional ties? Because he had thought, too, that she was beginning to fall in love with Jim? A mixture of all, perhaps. But he knew now, and the thought that she did not know, and something, some unknown stroke of fate, might still intervene, sent his foot down hard on the accelerator, and the car screaming along the dusty road.

He drove round the winding curve of the bay to where the great Hotel Splendide lifted its white frontage over the beach. Along its terrace, and over the yellow sands, were a scatter of brilliantly-coloured beach parasols, like a multitude of glowing mushrooms. It was the time when the young people began to troop up to the big hotel terrace, to sit round with their aperitifs and make plans for the evening, and families to trail back, sandy and sunburned, from the

beach to change for dinner. The time when fathers escaped to the smaller, less spectacular bars for a quiet drink, and when the streams of French workmen in their uniform, blue overalls and berets, were beginning to cycle home from the harbour, the fish market and the factories, like a brown-faced, blue-clad army.

He parked the car, and walked across the road to the beach. How on earth was he going to find them among this crowd? He had visions of himself ploughing through the thick soft sand, peering under the innumerable umbrellas, and the queer and lovely laughter, which seemed so much part of his love for Jean, rose within him for a moment. And then, as he stood, searching among moving faces below him, he heard her call, and saw her, standing at the farthest end of the long, uneven pile of rocks that divided the place from the private château beach. For a moment she stood there alone, waving and calling, and then she was joined by Jose's dancing little figure, and the yapping, bounding Chocolat. His eyes lit with eagerness, he raised his arm and waved in return, and started across the beach towards the rocks. Jean, forgetting for the first and only time in her life her responsibility toward her charges, started, as though she were on the other end of a tautening line, to meet him.

Jose shouted: "Jean! Where are you going? Is it time to go home? Where are you going?"

But Jean, unheeding, went shorewards, her slim, strong body, moving quickly, neat-footed across the slippery rocks.

Jose stared after her, and stared down at Chocolat in astonishment.

"She's forgotten us!" she said incredulously. As Chocolat immediately sat up and waved his paws, she added solemnly: "I think that everyone in France is mad but nice," and went back resignedly to collect their beach bag and clothes from the far point, before she trailed dejectedly shorewards.

Phillip reached the rocks, and began to climb slowly along them; the uneven steps and surfaces were easier for him than walking along a level pavement, for apart from his one misshapen foot, he was built with a close-knit, compact

strength. He paused and looked up. At the far end he could see Jose, with Chocolat, yapping and barking round her, and nearer, coming swiftly to meet him, was Jean, her big coolie hat tied under her chin, the short white shirt which she wore over her blue swim-suit flapping in the little breeze. She came quickly, swiftly, confidently, with the quick competent movements he so loved, coming eagerly to meet him. He began to hurry. Between them there was a deep cleft in the rocks, screened from the beach, screened from the sea. They dropped into it together, and stood, facing each other, their breath coming quickly from the swift, long climb, their eyes meeting with an eager, blazing question.

He stood, his arms hanging by his side, looking at her, at the lovely hair glowing in the bright sunshine, the question in her eyes, all the strong, splendid youth of her. He held out his arms without speaking, a gesture at once passionate and arrogant, and very, very sure, claiming her for his own.

There was a little intervening space, of rock, of slippery seaweed, and pools, and Jean never knew how she crossed it. She only knew that his arms were about her, and the hard strength of those arms sent little rockets of sheer delight shooting through her veins. She gave a little, soft laugh of pleasure, putting up her hands, touching his dark face, and then, with a sudden, reckless surge of triumph, lifted her lips to his.

They were completely oblivious to everything about them, they neither knew nor cared whether anyone could see them from the beach or from the gay canoes shooting about the sea. It was just as Phil had dreamed it could be, this flame of promise hidden by Jean's cool charm. This was the reality of her, here in his arms. Jean could never prevaricate or dissemble, or disguise her feelings where any deep emotion was touched. She loved him, and her eyes were alight with happiness, and her lips lifted to his in such delight that he felt his hands shake as he held her. It was like a song bursting within him, like the dawn song of the birds, like a shouting chorus of praise, of sheer delight in living. He knew, and Jean knew too, that this one moment was a

mountain peak, never to be caught or lived through again, until perhaps that time when she was really his.

Everything about them, the sunshine, the blue sea, the voices of the people rising from the beach behind the rocks, the dark, sentinel pines above on the shore, everything, the whole wide universe, seemed a crystal shell, enclosing him and this red-haired girl whom he loved.

His arms closed tightly round the small, sturdy figure. Their first kiss seemed so long ago, so light and meaningless, compared to this helpless and beautiful surrender. This was the finding and the sealing, this was the giving and the taking of all tenderness and all delight.

They drew away from each other suddenly, conscious of the noise of the beach they could not see, the rocks about them, the amused glances of the canoeists darting by on their light craft, of Jose's voice calling plaintively above Chocolat's barking. The colour flooded Jean's face and they were in the world again. She started away, saying confusedly: "I forgot Jose. . . ." But he caught her back, sitting down on a broad dry rock, pulling her down beside him.

"She's all right," he said. "We'll wait for her here. . . . Jean, my darling Jean. . . . Do you love me?"

"Well, what would I be doing——?" she began.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes, of course. . . ."

He laughed and kissed her again. "I love the roll of that Scottish 'of cour-r-rse.' Just try and get away, my girl, that's all! When will you marry me? *When?* I want a definite promise."

"Whenever you like," she said.

The foot, which from force of habit he would often hide, was pushed out in front of him, exposed in the sunshine. He made a little mocking gesture, like a salute, towards it. "There it is—I don't think I've ever looked at it squarely before. Ever since I was a child, and my stepmother was so ashamed of it. I've pretended it was just like the other one . . . and now, suddenly, because you love me, it is." He lifted her chin and began untying her hat-cord, letting the big sun-hat fall on to the rock behind them, ruffling the silken hair between his hands. "It's like burnished copper,"

he said. "It's like a bunch of red chrysanthemums. . . . Jean, you are so young and strong, and brave and gay and whole. Can you really love me? I'm ten years older than you, I'm lame and I've the devil of a temper. . . . All these weeks I've thought of every reason why you shouldn't love me and never a one why you should."

She leaned away from him, taking his face between her hands, shaking his head gently in the old familiar nursery gesture. "Let me look at you," she said softly. "All the little bitter lines about your mouth have gone and I had promised myself that one day I would kiss them away. What were all these nonsensical reasons? Tell me?"

"I thought that you might want someone—quite different. A good man like—like Jim. . . ."

"Oh." Her eyes were grave. "So that's why it was you kept me waiting and wondering and eating my heart out all these weeks." She touched his lips with hers, so that in a moment he had his arms about her, and was holding her very close. "You and Marilyn," she said mockingly. "Such wise fools, both of you. I don't want anyone better or different. . . . I only want you, my dearest."

"Jean," he said again, huskily, and suddenly had no doubt any more, taking her and claiming her as his own.

They heard a faint bark on the rocks behind them, and turned quickly, and found Jose and Chocolat standing on the rocks behind them. Jose dropped her burden of beach-bags wearily, and then, seeing Phil's arms about Jean, her eyes brightened and her cheeks flushed; her head went on one side in an attitude of intense curiosity. Chocolat's head was twisted on the other side with exactly the same expression. The effect was completed by the fact that Jose wore a red bow on her curly hair, and earlier in the afternoon had tied a similar one on Chocolat's top-knot. Their arms tightening about one another, Phil and Jean rocked with laughter.

Jose leaped down from the rocks excitedly, and burst out: "Are you going to be married, Jean? To Mr. Lowitz? In a long white dress and lilies and a veil, and loads and loads of bridesmaids? Because if you are, can I be a flower-girl? With a long dress of velvet and a basket of rose petals? Some of the girls at school have been bridesmaids and

flower-girls, and I just didn't think I ever could be, because I've just simply no aunts at all to get married, and it nearly always *has* to be an aunt." She had an imploring gesture, eloquent and moving. "But you're practically an aunt, aren't you, Jean. I never thought or *dreamed* I'd get such a chance with you, Jean. . . ."

"Good heavens," said Phil in alarm, turning Jean's face to his, and examining her so closely, the colour flooded into her cheeks again; "is it possible she's not as attractive as I imagined?"

"Phii . . ." she protested.

He laughed, kissing the reproachful mouth heedlessly. "No, you're wrong Jose. You had every chance of being a bridesmaid. It's the most wonderful luck in the world that she decided to wait for me. We are getting married as soon as we get back to England. . . ."

"But in a church," said Jose desperately; she had obviously gone thoroughly into the matter with her luckier school fellows, "not in a registry office . . . please. . . ."

"Certainly not," said Phil firmly. "In a church."

"Then it's not a secret?"

"Secret? We want everyone in the world to know. I'm thinking of hiring heralds to go round the town, blowing trumpets, and shouting, 'Oyez, oyez, Jean Dundass loves Phil Lowitz, and all the world is golden.'"

Jean pinched his arm, to subdue his mad mood. "That's enough of that!" she said severely. "The tide's coming in, and we shall all be drowned if we don't hurry."

He picked up their beach-bags and swung them over his shoulder, smiling into Jose's anxious and bewildered face and taking her hand. "We shall have to think over this flower-girl stunt, Jose, and if there is a bridesmaid I promise faithfully it shall be you."

She smiled with relief, standing impatiently while Jean gave her a quick rub down, and put her back into her shirt and shorts before they scrambled back over the rocks to the beach.

They went up to the hotel, and had an aperitif in the big bar, and bought Jose a grenadine. They stayed for a while, talking a little, too happy even to make plans, just content

to be with each other, and then when the sun began to dip towards the sea-line, went to get the car, and set off for their own hotel. Jean sat in front next to Phil, and they held hands while he drove, and sang together, going from nursery songs to fashionable bits of jazz and folk songs. Phil's gay tuneful tenor followed by Jean's clear voice, Jose's tuneless squeak and Chocolat's shrill bark. It was an expression of their mood, completely happy, thoughtless, light-hearted . . . everything was perfect in their world.

“Cadet Rouselle a trois maisons,
Cadet Rouselle a trois maisons,
Qui n'ont ni poutres nis chevrons . . .” they sang.

Up and down and round the dusty rolling roads, past the blue-clad workmen plodding home, the children carrying the long rolls of bread for the evening meal, the old women in their white bonnets leading the cow back from pasture . . . they sang and waved, and behaved like fools and lovers and children, and then suddenly Jose stopped singing.

They had just rounded the last corner before the château. About a mile away its turrets pierced the sky above the walnut trees. Far along the road someone was running frantically towards the approaching car. Phil slowed down, and Jose said: “Look, there's Mummy.” And with her instant intuition so far as her mother was concerned: “Oh, Jean, what's the matter? Why is she running. Why is she so frightened. Oh, what's the matter? . . . Mummy, Mummy . . .”

“It's all right, Jackson,” said Jean sharply, “there's nothing wrong.”

Phil glanced at her, and without a word jammed on the brakes. Marilyn was some fifty yards away, running blindly towards them with curious, stumbling steps, quite different from her usual swift, graceful movements. Phil stopped the car and got out. He said quickly, and authoritatively: “Jose, stay here with Jean.” Jose, who had been ready to jump out and rush to her mother the minute the car stopped, sat meekly back in her seat again. Phil hurried up the road towards Marilyn. Even as he went towards that tragic,

stumbling figure, the light seemed to go out of his lovely day.

She came up to him, her face white, her blue eyes frantic with fear, catching his arm, leaning against him, gasping for breath. "Merry," he said quickly, "hold on. Pull yourself together. Jose's in the car. You mustn't frighten her." His other hand came sharply on to her shoulder, giving her a little shake, so that she stood upright, fighting for control, the long, shuddering, anguished breaths coming a little more slowly. "That's better. Now, then, what's happened, Merry?"

For a moment she was unable to speak, and then she put her hand to her lips to stop their trembling. "Where have you been? . . . I waited and waited, and then I couldn't stand it any longer. . . . What have you been doing?"

Phillip said gently: "Asking Jean to marry me, and having a drink to celebrate the miracle of her saying yes. It's an important step, you know. Takes time." He smiled, but no answering smile lit her frightened eyes. "What's happened?"

"It's Lance. . . . I went to meet him. He's down on the beach, Phil . . . he's dead!"

"Dead?" he repeated incredulously. "How can he be? You must have made a mistake."

"No . . . no . . . no . . . he's lying there, down on the dunes. . . ." Her voice rose hysterically, and his hand on her shoulder tightened. "I turned him over. . . . I think . . . I think he's been . . . I think someone has . . ."

"You mean he's been murdered?"

They stared at each other for a moment, then quickly, comfortingly he touched her hand. "Look, Marilyn. Don't panic. It isn't any help, whatever has happened. You may easily have been quite mistaken. Wait here. I'll go down and see." He turned and plunged into the trees at the side of the road.

Marilyn waited, listening, until he was out of sight and hearing, and then walked slowly down the road to the car. In reply to Jose's frantic: "What is it, Mummy? What's the matter? Where's Mr. Lowitz gone?" she managed to say with convincing calm: "Nothing, darling. I've—I've left something up at the château . . . he's gone to fetch it for

me." She kissed Jose, and was rewarded by seeing the apprehension fade from her eyes. Reassured, she immediately burst forth importantly :

"Mr. Lowitz and Jean are going to be married as soon as we get home, and I am going to be a flower-girl."

Marilyn looked at Jean's grave, quiet face and gave an apologetic little ghost of a smile, realising for the first time how she had shattered their happy day. They waited there for what seemed an interminable while. A few peasants passed towards the village on their cycles, glancing at them incuriously as they pedalled away up the hill. Presently there was a rustle among the trees.

"Here's Phil," said Jean.

Lowitz came slowly out to the car : his face was quite white beneath its tan. He beckoned Marilyn over to him.

"He's certainly dead. Merry—how long is it since you found him?"

"I don't know . . . not long after you went . . . about ten minutes. I felt scared, the wood was so quiet, and came back to the château, but the last coach was just leaving. I had a feeling of something horrible . . . but I told myself it was nonsense, and made myself go down there again . . . and then I found him. . . . Why . . . ?" She stopped, gazing into his serious face, every vestige of colour draining from her already white face. "You mean . . . they might think I did it?"

It was what he had been thinking, but he put his arm round her shoulders and gave her a little squeeze. "Now, don't start jumping ahead. But . . . it's—it's nearly two hours since I left for Sable d'Or. I drove to the village to drop the chauffeur before I went to the beach. I expect the police will want to know what you were doing during that time."

"*The police?*"

"Of course—it isn't an accident. Why didn't you try to get someone straight away?"

Marilyn held her head. What had she done during that hour after she had found Lance? . . . It had seemed an age of agony to her. She began to speak quickly : "I was alone. I can't prove anything. When I found him I was terrified,

and ran back to the château, but of course it was all locked and empty. Then I went across to the cottages . . . but there were only some children and an old woman, and they only spoke Breton . . . they couldn't understand my French at all. Then I thought, like you did, that he might not be dead, that I should have tried to help him. I went back, but of course he was quite dead. . . . Then I came up to the road again, and waited and waited, and then I couldn't stand it and started along the road to meet you. . . ."

"Did no one pass you?"

"Peasants going from work."

"You should have stopped one and sent a message to the police. . . ."

"Yes. . . . But by then I just didn't know what I was doing. . . ."

He was silent, then taking her arm he led her over to the car.

"Jean, you can drive, can't you?"

"Yes." Jean waited. She did not know yet what had happened, although she knew from their faces it was something terrible. Waiting for him, she and Marilyn had not dared to speak in front of Jose.

"Mr. Saxelby has—has had an accident." His glance was significant and she felt her throat constrict at its meaning. "Take Marilyn and Jose back to the hotel. I'll wait here." He went on in a casual voice, calmly as though what he said had no desperate significance: "Send the police at once, and a doctor, and be as quick as you can."

Jean neither panicked nor asked questions. She got into the driver's seat, and, when Marilyn was in beside Jose, drove quickly away in the direction of the village. Phil sat down and lit a cigarette, waiting for the police to come.

It was a narrow darkish room, at the top of a tall, dark block of tenement buildings. The child in the cot in the corner, a baby of eighteen months, attempted to stand on its head, and with the fortunate, but maddening recuperative power of a baby, grinned up at its anxious and delighted mother, and at Jim sitting on a chair by the cot side. Jim was equally delighted. For the last few days he had called

to see this baby three times a day, and twenty-four hours before she had been lying still, heavy-eyed and feverish, breathing with the quick shallow breaths of acute bronchitis.

"I think she'll do now," he said to the mother, and tapped the little seat stuck so provocatively in the air.

"You could smack them, couldn't you?" she said appreciatively. "One minute you'd think you were going to lose them, and next minute dancing about as though they'd never been ill at all."

"Go carefully for a week, keep her warm and out of draughts. After that we must see about plenty of fresh air. Call at the side door for the medicine, and I think we ought to see about a tonic for you. You look just about all in."

"Oh, I'm all right now I know she's better. It's the worry that gets you down. But you look as though you could do with a rest yourself, Doctor."

"It's these stairs of yours—it's like climbing Mount Everest." The stairs were a standing joke between them. He bade her good night, and picked up his hat and case and went downstairs to his car. It was an airless evening and the heat seemed to hang between the high narrow buildings. The older people sat out on the steps, or in chairs in the yard, and even the children seemed quieter than usual, for the heat was too great for energetic play.

Jim got into his car and started for home. He was tired, for his was a tiring job, but it was the aching loneliness that seemed to be destroying him. He missed Marilyn as he would miss a limb amputated from his body. There was not one moment of the day that he was not achingly conscious of her absence. She had been extravagant and careless, she had sacrificed her home to her ambition, in many ways she had been everything which a conventional wife is not supposed to be. But she had filled his life with tenderness and laughter and colour, and when she went it was the very soul of his existence that went with her. The house was so lonely, more so because every single thing in it was of her choosing, a reminder of her presence. He had told himself that he would readjust himself to this new life, and no doubt he would, but it would take a long, dreary time. As he turned the corner, and saw the old house, with its

fine portico and delicate iron balconies, its windows shining in the evening sunlight which streamed across the river, he knew that he could not go on living there alone. The grey and silver walls of the drawing-room reminded him of Marilyn in her grey dress. When he came into the high, spacious hall, with the little sofa-table by the wall, he looked instinctively for her gloves or handbag, always tossed down there while she ran through to the kitchen to see the children and Jean. The stairs that curved with such elegant grandeur, to which Marilyn had added a more modern elegance, skimming down them like a swallow to greet him—and once, that time, to greet Lance Saxelby. The bedroom where her perfume clung, where so many of her possessions were still. He knew then that he would have to leave this house and this practice. That if he were to build a new life, it must be a completely new life, perhaps even in a new country. For a moment a little smile of self-mockery lit his expressive eyes—the idea of himself and his twins packing up to conquer a new world was irresistibly ridiculous. But it must be out of this house, anyway. To-night he would sleep in one of the children's rooms, or the spare room. He would not cross that big room with its deep carpet, the lingering perfume, to the dressing-room where he had been sleeping again. He would not stand in the dark remembering how often he would come in from a call, into that dark room, and the light would flick on by the bed, and there would be Marilyn, crumpling with drowsy affection, fumbling for slippers and gown so that she could make him some tea. She made every home-coming something unique and precious, she was the centre of this house, and without her it had no heart and no life. To-morrow he would put the practice up for sale.

There was a newspaper man at the corner, where every evening he stopped to buy a paper, and automatically he stopped this evening, holding his penny out through the car window as the man came across the pavement with the paper.

"Good evening, Tom."

"Evening, Dr. Grayson." Something in the man's voice and expression disturbed his preoccupation. He was staring

at him in a curious, concentrated way that made him smile quickly, saying: "What's the matter, Tom? Anything wrong?"

The man swallowed convulsively, shook his head, and said almost angrily: "Of course she had nothing to do with it. I said that straight away. It's just these newspapers. They always make everything sound bad."

Jim frowned, puzzled, began vaguely to say: "Why, what are they saying now? . . ." Spread his paper across the driving wheel, and looked straight into Marilyn's eyes. A big photograph, half-across the front page, and the screaming headline: "Lance Saxelby found dead. French police suspect foul play." And then in lesser type: "Body discovered by Marilyn Falaise. . . ." The column beneath developed into the more chatty type of journalese; Saxelby and Marilyn had been close friends for some months; a description of the finding of the body. . . . Jim thrust the paper into the pigeon-hole in the dashboard. His mind was running with a curiously rapid facility. His passport was up to date. Who would take over the practice for him at such short notice? Was there a plane to-night? Without speaking to the newspaper man, he drove the car on and into the gate at Riverhouse. He had only one thought. No suspicion, no anger, no despair. Only that he must get to Marilyn as soon as it were humanly possible.

CHAPTER 9

DURING THE next day Marilyn did not know whether Phil was her guardian angel, or a complete tyrant. He had accepted everything she had said about finding Lance Saxelby dead, without the faintest shadow of doubt or suspicion. Neither she, nor the company, he said, had anything to hide, the thing was out of their hands now, it was no use pretending that Lance had ever been a particularly popular member of the little community, so there was no need for anyone to stop work or behave dramatically off the set. The work Lance had done on the film had finished on the day of his death. He had been leaving Brittany the following day, and the scenes which remained to be done, mostly incidental exteriors round and about the château, would, in any case, have been shot without him. They were there if the police wanted them for questioning, and they would give the police every facility. If he was disappointed or worried about the sort of publicity Lance's death would cause, he showed no sign of it. Only he, and perhaps Jean, knew how he felt about this—for he and Jean seemed to have found a life of inner calm, a sort of enchantment in which they lived for each other. And although they showed their usual understanding and kindness to everyone about them, particularly to Marilyn, she had the feeling that now, in this first discovery of their love for each other, they were immune from all ordinary human hurts and disappointments.

Afterwards Marilyn never knew whether Phillip really needed those extra scenes between her and Lacey and Lakin. They were all just small instances of continuity, barely noticeable when the film was completed. But he kept them hard at it all day, running down spiral staircases, walking through ruined ivy-clad arches, walking along the terraces, furtively peering from behind shrubs and walls. It gave them all something to do, and something to think about besides the tragedy that had happened. Phillip would not

allow any of them to hang about the hotel, waiting to be questioned. He took them up to the château and worked them hard. If the police wanted them, they came to the set, or a car drove them into the headquarters in the nearest town.

At the end of that first day, after Jose was in bed, Marilyn sat with Jean and Phillip in the little sitting-room he had booked for them at the hotel. They would all much rather have sat out on the terrace in the dying sunshine, or walked down to one of the cafés in the town, but since yesterday every appearance of anyone attached to the company had caused comment and curiosity, glances and whispers, and perhaps a little resentment, for the local people, who lived chiefly by the summer tourist trade, had not yet realised that a murder, properly publicised, could be as much of an attraction as anything else. But a murder committed last year, or the year before, with the murderer safely brought to justice, to describe and chat about in the cafés, is one thing, and a murder just committed, with the murderer not yet discovered, and probably lurking in the community, is quite another. So the film company found that they were not quite so popular, especially when the reporters began to descend upon the villagers like crows upon carrion.

The police, though not quite so detached as their English counterparts and obviously very impressed by Marilyn's fame and beauty, were extremely efficient, and the questions went on ceaselessly through that first day. Marilyn wondered if they would ever leave her in peace again. Yes, Mr. Saxelby had been dead when she found him—she had run back to the château, and to the cottages nearby to try and get help. Phil and Jean were relieved when the ancient village woman whom Marilyn had approached had recalled the incident and confirmed that Marilyn had spoken to her. She proved to be stone deaf as well as only able to speak the Breton, which accounted for her not understanding a word that had been said. But she did confirm that Marilyn had come running to her, asking her something which she had not understood. What had Miss Falaise done then? She had thought perhaps she had made a mistake, since in her terror she had run away from the body immediately, and

had made herself return to be sure Mr. Saxelby was beyond help. And then? She had gone back to the road to wait for her friends whom she knew would pick her up shortly. They had been much longer than she had anticipated, and after waiting for what seemed a long while she had started down the road towards Sable d'Or to meet them. Had she seen anyone else? Workers cycling home. Why had she not stopped them and sent for the police? She did not know—she just had not thought of asking for further help after her failure at the cottages. There was a polite silence, and Marilyn had said with sudden resentment: "I can't prove any of this, of course, no one saw me."

"On the contrary, madame, the old woman saw you, and several of the cyclists have confirmed they saw you waiting by the château gates at this time."

The questioning began again. Yes, she had gone to meet Mr. Saxelby on the beach by appointment, because he had asked her to do so. No, she did not know why he particularly wanted to see her, unless it was to tell her that he was leaving that evening for the South of France, but she already knew that. How? It was general knowledge—everyone knew. Why had he decided to leave so suddenly. "I don't know," said Marilyn suddenly. "He seemed to have been upset by something, or someone—almost frightened—ever since we have been in France, he has only thought of finishing the work quickly and getting away." The inspector nodded—everyone in the company had spoken about that. Was it true that she had, during the early part of her visit to Brittany, been staying with Mr. Saxelby at a villa a little farther along the coast? Marilyn, with hands clenched and cheeks flaming, had replied briefly: "Yes."

Had they quarrelled?

"No."

Why had madame suddenly decided to leave Mr. Saxelby and the villa, and stay at the hotel with the rest of the company? Because her little girl had come from England to stay with her, and she did not wish the child to know anything of the association. She had intended to join Mr. Saxelby again later? No. Why? Again the clenched hands and the painful flush. Marilyn had a terrible vision

of herself having to say these things aloud in a court, of everything she said being blazoned across the newspapers, of people reading about it . . . the people at home—Jim? But Phil had said: "You have nothing to be afraid of if you tell the truth." It was a purely personal matter, she replied, she had decided against continuing any further association with Mr. Saxeby. Why? Because she had made a mistake. There was no other woman? Or man? Marilyn felt a hysterical desire to laugh. Suppose she had said yes, there was another man, the husband she had loved, and foolishly doubted, and betrayed. . . . What would they say then? That she had lured Lance down on to that lonely beach, strangled him. Had she wanted that? She had not wanted to destroy him . . . she had just wished desperately and unhappily that he had never existed, and that the whole sordid, miserable affair had never been—that she had been back in the safety and splendour of her love. But she shook her head, and said wearily, that there was no other man or woman, no jealousy, just a mutual agreement to separate. And so on and on went the interminable questioning, and now when it was over, and she was back at the hotel again with her friends, she was exhausted.

She looked across the dinner table at Phil and Jean, her eyes wide with horror, the food untouched before her.

"They think I did it," she said.

The horror melted into insignificance at the swift warm denial in their eyes, the way both their hands came across the table, comfortingly touching hers. •

She wondered what she would have done, how she would have felt if she had been alone here, if Jean had not been with her, or if she had been working for some strange director and not for Phil, her friend? From the moment on the road from Sable d'Or when she had told them of the tragedy they had given her the utmost confidence, devotion and loyalty. Not for one moment had they doubted her story, although she knew, and the police knew, it was vague, doubtful and unproven. And Phil and Jean were in love, they had every right to complete happiness, and surely must resent this terrible thing that had happened, which had happened through her fault, for she could not rid herself of

the thought that somehow, even if it was for some reason she did not know, she was the cause of Lance's death. She and he had been lovers, and she had ended the association. No one else, no one in the company or the village, had any reason, motive or interest in harming Lance. Already the village was full of reporters, and she knew the newspapers were carrying every detail of the story. She knew how sick at heart Phil must be that his film, his story on which he had lavished so much work, care and thought should be launched on a wave of notoriety. And she *was* guilty in a way. It was her folly, her thoughtlessness, her mad, impulsive recklessness which had brought this about. But there had been no word or hint of reproach from either Phil or Jean.

Phil said quietly, as he reached over to fill her wine glass : " They don't think anything of the kind. Be logical, Marilyn. Saxelby was an enormous man, strong, tall and muscular. . . . No woman could have killed him with her bare hands. And that's how he was killed."

" What about a woman whom he knew very well ? Who might catch him unawares ? A woman whom he was expecting . . ."—her voice sank to a horrified whisper—" whom he was making love to ? "

He shook his head, his eyes just a little amused. He glanced at Jean, meeting her smile, both of them knowing that even in her fear and horror Marilyn was dramatising the situation.

" Not even then, Merry, so don't play to the gallery. That isn't why they are badgering you, Merry. They don't suspect you, but they are sure you must have some idea who did it. You were there alone such a long while, and Saxelby had not been dead long. Perhaps just before you came." She shivered, and he said lightly : " In cases like these the police always think of the *crime passionel*. They are certain there must be another man in the case, mad with jealousy." He laughed suddenly out loud. " The fact that I am in a bemused state over Jean, and that Jim is safely in London, is almost more than they can bear."

Marilyn smiled wanly. " Thank heavens Jim was safe in London," she said, " or, of course, he would be the obvious suspect. There's just one thing I wanted to ask you, though.

I shall have to stay here. As long as they want me—and they may want me . . . quite a long time.” She paused, remembering her fear of approaching the beach, trying to remember everything, conscious of something that escaped her. What had made her so very afraid? She jerked her thoughts away. All last night, all to-day, she had thought of nothing else but the pine wood and the sea, and the silence, and the tall heavy figure lying motionless in the hollow dunes, the sunlight gleaming on the silver-blond hair, the seabirds, knowing they had nothing to fear, running quite close to the out-flung hand. She must stop thinking about it. “Jean,” she said, “there’s no need for you to stay in France. You’ll want to be with Phil.”

“Of course I’ll stay,” said Jean shortly. “You’ll imagine yourself into a fit without me. And so will Phil.”

“Please, Jean. The French reporters are already here. By to-morrow morning they’ll arrive from England too. Please, Jean, take Jose back to England to Jim to-morrow. If the film is finished there is no need for anyone the police don’t want to stay. We shall only be home a day or so earlier than we expected in any case. I want Jose to be kept out of this. I don’t want anyone to question her or bother her, or to suggest to her in any way that I might be in danger. I don’t want her to know about it if it is possible. So far, because you and Phil and all the company have been the absolute souls of tact, and because she cannot understand French nor read very well, she does not understand. She barely knew Lance, and hasn’t missed him. Why should she. If she goes back to England, there is no need for her to know anything at all about it. Will you take her back for me, Jean?”

“Of course I will—if you wish it.”

Marilyn rose to her feet. She looked thin and worn out, and exquisitely young and beautiful. Looking at her, Phil knew why he loved to work with her—she was born to be photographed. Weariness, terror, even old age would have no power to touch that delicate framework, those pure, clear, lovely lines. In this film they had been working on she was going to be a revelation of beauty to the cinema-going public, and it would be a crime if this awful business should in any

way prevent its showing. Marilyn said: "Jim was right to send you with Jose, Jean. And I was right, too, when I said he did not think that I could look after her myself. When I think of it, I've had nothing from any of you but kindness and friendship. I've repaid it finely, haven't I?"

Phil propped his cheek on this thin brown hand, and regarded her quizzically, shaking his head in wonder. "There she goes again! I don't see how you can blame yourself. It would have happened anyway, whether you had known him or not. Whoever did it, it had nothing to do with you, so there's no point in your feeling guilty. And you know, Merry, this guiltiness of yours is because you fell in love with Lance, not because he's dead, or even because you are sorry that he's dead—because you're not, are you?"

She stared, startled at his penetration, and a flicker of a smile came into her eyes. "It's true. But I wish—he hadn't been killed . . . so horribly. I just wish he'd spent all his life in Australia, or wherever it was he came from, and never crossed my path."

Phil said dryly: "In the mood you were in, Merry, someone else would have crossed it. Lance wasn't the cause. He was just—a promise of escape."

"You and Jean!" Marilyn said impatiently. "You know more about me than I know about myself. How right you both are. I've been a damned fool and I know it. But I didn't expect you to know it—and still . . ." She paused, and Jean said gently:

"And still love you? Why not? And we'll not be the only ones, Merry."

Her dark eyes lit with a swift hope, that died almost as soon as it arose. Friends—yes. But Jim was more than a friend.

"Thank you, Jean. Well, I'm paying for my stupidity. I expected to—from the beginning. But not quite like this."

"Go and try to get some sleep," said Phil, rising, "and I'll telephone the airport and try to get reservations tomorrow for Jean and Jose and Chocolat. That quarantine period when he reaches the other side is going to cause some heartaches."

Marilyn went slowly upstairs to her room, where Jose in

her own small bed was fast asleep, with Chocolat curled up at her feet.

Phil went to telephone the airport, and to make all final arrangements for the company's departure. The technicians were to leave in the morning, and the wardrobe people with the costumes. When he came back he took Jean's arm, and they wandered out to the coast road, and out along the cliff in the brilliant moonlight. There were very few people about now, except occasional whispering lovers. No glances of resentment or curiosity, no voices saying that these were two of the English film people, who had murdered the handsome actor. Nothing and no one but the quiet sea shimmering beneath the silver moon, and the whispering little waves on the shore, and the green and red lights of the fishing boats creeping out of the harbour towards the open sea. They walked down to the harbour and at the far end of the stone jetty stood together, hand-in-hand, looking out to sea, and then turning back, saw the great bulk of the château with its soaring towers against the brilliant moonlit sky.

"I wonder," said Phil quietly, "who amongst us wanted to kill Lance Saxelby, and why?" He chuckled with his lips against her hair. "I think I'm the most obvious suspect. I loathed the sight of him—a damn' bad actor and a first-prize swine, if ever I met one."

Jean shivered, pressing herself against him, as though to find comfort in the hard warmth of his body. "You think—it must have been someone in the company?"

"Who else could it have been?" he said quietly.

Marilyn tried to sleep through the long night, fighting a losing battle with the tormenting sleeplessness of a disturbed mind. She had been sleeping badly for a long while now, but never until the night before had she known a whole night when even weariness could not bring her rest, and the slow hours marched past, black against her unclosed lids. Towards dawn, in desperation, she rose and took some sleeping tablets, knowing she would need all her strength and courage during the following day, and presently fell into a heavy sleep.

Jean woke up at eight, hearing Jose stir through the

communicating door to her own room, and crept quietly in, whispering to her that her mummy was very tired, working so long yesterday, and that she would not wake her but let her sleep as long as she could. She took her back into her own room and dressed her, and then when she herself was dressed took her and Chocolat out for a run on the beach before breakfast, while it was still empty of holiday makers, and to break the news to her that they would be flying home to-day. To her relief Jose took it very well. She understood that Marilyn would follow very shortly, and she thought the quicker she got home the quicker they could make plans for this spectacular wedding which at the moment was colouring her every waking moment.

"What colour do you think I should wear at your wedding?" she asked Jean cautiously.

Jean, who knew all Jose's dearest ambitions very well, replied tactfully: "Well, I think a really beautiful crimson velvet would be wonderful," and was rewarded by the beaming delight in Jose's blue eyes.

It was after eleven when Marilyn finally woke up. She had slept heavily and dreamlessly, and for a moment forgot where she was and smiled up into the sunshine, and snuggled pleasantly back among her pillows, and then, like a black cloud memory came back, the memory of the long day of fear and questioning, of the dead, still figure on the beach, the sunlight shining on the bright fair hair. The memories came back so sharply they were like a physical blow, so that she put her hands over her face with a little sound, half-sob, half-groan, shutting out the mocking sunshine. She felt terrified, and completely, frighteningly alone. Her eyes were burning and dry, and her head began to throb again with the agonising nervous headache that had recently tormented her. She felt beaten. The thought that she would have to get up, to face the day ahead, to answer more questions, was terrible. She wanted comfort, and there was only one person in the whole world who could give her comfort, and she had no longer the right to ask him for it . . . she had lost the right to ask him for anything.

She heard a slight movement in the room, the creak of the basket-chair, and sat up in bed quickly, thinking that Jose

was awake and watching her. She sat up, her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, staring. Jim was sitting by the side of her bed, unshaven, grubby, weary, for he had been travelling all night and had had no sleep. He said very gently: "It's all right, Merry. I'm here . . ." and came to the bedside and took her in his arms, as though they had never been parted, as though they were in their own room at Riverhouse, and he had just come in from a night call, as though she had been scared by some meaningless nightmare, and he was telling her it was all over, and she was quite, quite safe.

She buried her head in his shoulder; the tears, so long pent up inside her, suddenly released, were pouring down her face. But he turned her shamed face up to his, smiling, kissing the closed, wet eyes, and the sweet, sad mouth. "Merry, my darling," he said; "Merry, please, look at me, my darling love. . . ."

She looked up at him, deep into his eyes, and saw no accusation or reproach there, but only love for her. She knew then, that whatever happened, they were together again. It was like the wonderful relief following an awful dream from which she had awakened to find herself safe in his arms. Without any other thought or question, except that she was in trouble and she needed him, he had come to her. They were close again, close and safe once more in their old understanding and unity. Later on they would talk, and later when she had fully realised the wonder of him being there with her, she might find the courage to ask for his forgiveness. But not now. Now she could only cling to him in thankfulness, knowing that without each other their lives were empty. They had no need for words. They knew, better than they had ever known before, because of the past bitterness and fear and doubt, that whatever else happened in their lives, nothing could ever part them again but death.

Presently Jean and Jose came back from the beach, and it was rather like one of the old mornings in Marilyn's bedroom at Riverhouse, except that Phil was there as well. Marilyn was sitting up in bed, pale, with dark shadows under her eyes, but with a misty, smiling happiness about her . . .

not afraid any more. Jose, a little grave, very conscious of mysterious grown-up undercurrents which she did not understand, but happy because her father was with them again, and because she had a wonderful dream picture of herself in a crimson velvet dress strewing flowers at Jean's wedding. Her world was safe when she was with Marilyn, but if Jim was there as well it was perfect. She sat on the foot of her mother's bed, with Chocolat on her lap, and ate the fruit from the breakfast tray which Jean had brought up to the bedroom.

Jim was in the bathroom, washing, and shaving with Phil's razor, for he had brought no luggage with him, having only time to get some money and catch a plane. Phil was sitting in the basket-chair with a sheaf of telegrams for Marilyn from friends in London and many parts of the world, messages of comfort and encouragement for the most part, a few of them scurrilous—and anonymous, the kind that all famous people receive from the frustrated and envious who love to see success dragged down in the dust. Phil went through them all, passing her the messages from friends and well-wishers, and tearing up those from her unnamed enemies with silent contempt.

The hard core of fear had not completely melted, but Marilyn felt rested now, and safer and stronger, because Jim was there. She read through the messages, but hardly saw them. This morning was not really like the mornings in Riverhouse, when they had all been so gay. There was the tense undercurrent of anxiety. Her mind went back again to the day when she had found Lance dead, turning endlessly over every minute, those long dragging minutes of terror and confusion, trying to remember the thing that had escaped her. . . . What was it that had sent her flying back in terror to the château, the first time, before she even knew that Lance was dead? She remembered—the cracking of a dry twig. As though someone was creeping stealthily away behind the trees. The same sound she and Lance had heard, that last night when he had held her in his arms, that night when she had realised the truth about herself, and Lance and Jim . . . the evening that she would do anything to forget. . . .

She started, Phil had risen to his feet, saying sharply : "What's that ?"

There was a sound of cars drawing into the gravelled courtyard outside the window. Phil went across, pushing the shutters wide to look down. Two cars had stopped outside, and a little posse of khaki-clad policemen, with their round, dark peaked caps, were getting out. The hotel guests, reading their papers and clatting on the terrace, were all silent, frozen into immobility, staring down at the police.

Marilyn caught Phil's expression, and said quite calmly, although her heart suddenly began to race : "Is it the police again ?" At his nod, she slipped her dressing-gown on, got out of bed and joined him at the window. Jim and Jean came too. Jim put his arm round her, and she said with a little catch in her breath : "Do you think they have come for me ?"

They all stood silently, looking down like spectators at a play.

They saw a middle-aged, rather distinguished man rise unhurriedly from his breakfast table at the end of the terrace, put away his spectacles, fold his napkin, and advance courteously towards the officer in charge. They spoke together for a little while, apparently in complete mutual agreement, and then very quietly, without any fuss, he got into one of the cars between two of the policemen, the cars backed noisily out of the courtyard and drove away. The talk on the terrace burst out like the hum of swarming bees. A few people ran agitatedly across to the gate to watch the cars out of sight. And from behind them they heard Jose's puzzled little voice saying curiously : "Why have they taken Mr. Lakin away, Mummy ? Where has he gone ?" And the little silver bracelet jingled as she tugged impatiently at her mother's hand.

The company left for England the following day, leaving only one member behind. Phillip was not allowed to see Lakin, but he set about making arrangements for his defence. There was nothing to keep them now, and much to do in London. Jean was to live at Riverhouse until her wedding the following week at the little local parish church by the river. Jim and Marilyn drove down to see the twins, who

were still staying with his mother . . . the twins were delighted to see their parents, but returned almost immediately to the most important business of digging large holes in the sands, so they kissed them, and decided to leave them where they were for a little longer, until a housekeeper had been found to take over Jean's duties.

Jose had been disappointed that the wedding was to be a very simple one, without any troops of bridesmaids, choirs and splendour. But at least there would be a little reception at Riverhouse, and a small silvery-white cake stood swathed in cellophane on the kitchen table. Jean was going to wear white and a lovely lace veil, and Marilyn and Phil had used their considerable influence on a theatrical costumier to produce a long dress of crimson velvet, embroidered with silver leaves, that made Jose look like a little medieval fairy-tale princess. There was a silver basket for rose petals, and a little silver cap for her dark curly hair. The night before Jean's wedding Jose lay tucked up in bed, gazing at the dress as it lay over a chair in her room, almost dizzy with delight. Everything was wonderful again. Not just the wedding. Mummy was back, and was going to stay with them, and she was happy—that was the most important thing. Jose did not notice the marks that terror and sorrow had left on Marilyn's beauty, the new maturity and quietness, but she did know that the smiling beautiful presence of her mother was there, in happiness and at peace.

On the night before Jean's wedding, the grown-ups sat together in the drawing room at Riverhouse, talking, making a few final plans. The house looked lovely, Jean had served it lovingly, almost regretfully this week, knowing that to-morrow she would leave it to go to her own home. She had found it shabby, untidy, neglected, and she was leaving it shiningly cared for, and beautifully at peace. The sunlight, slanting through the tall windows, lit its soft colours of grey and blue and wine colour, the graceful shapes of the old furniture, and sent water reflections dancing along the walls and glittering on old china and glass. She sat on the arm of Phil's chair, her arm along the back, and he, conscious of her nearness, smiled quickly up at her, his dark eyes saying "To-morrow . . ." so that the colour, which he loved

to tease into her cheeks, rose quickly, making him smile with a new, sharp tenderness.

Marilyn lounged in her old place on the sofa, her feet on Jim's knee where he sat at the other end. She wore her long grey gown, and purple stones in her ears, and poured coffee for them, just as she always had, and yet, among them, she alone had changed. Watching her Phil knew that this was a different woman, and would be a different actress. Marilyn had really grown up.

They spoke of Lakin, whose arrest had followed his own written confession which he had sent into the police immediately he realised suspicion might fall on Marilyn. It was a sad, pitiful tale of tragedy. Ten years before, when Lakin had still been Coombe, his daughter had taken her own life, and Lakin had been waiting and preparing himself to take revenge on the man who had broken her heart and his life. He had been quite frank about it all, even a little proud, as though it had all been a very specialised theatrical performance. He had even had himself trained in Judo—Japanese wrestling—knowing that he must have an advantage over a man so much younger and stronger than himself. It was obvious that under his rather old-fashioned and courteous exterior he was not by any means sane on this subject. He felt completely justified.

"His daughter was only eighteen," Phil told them, "and he'd slaved to give her everything he thought she should have. A good education, a comfortable home, and he tried to keep her away from the stage. But he was an actor, and that was impossible, and she became stage-struck, and against his wishes she got into a touring company and she met Lance there. It was in Australia many years ago."

"I think Lance recognised him," said Marilyn quickly; "at least sufficiently to make him uneasy and troubled. From that very first moment when he met Lakin at the airport, I knew there was something wrong. You remember, we thought he was afraid."

"It must have been a premonition then," said Phil. "He had never seen Lakin before?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Perhaps it was the likeness between Lakin and his

daughter. He has very curious, light-coloured eyes, attractive, but strange. That was why I engaged him for the part. In the pictures the papers have published you can see how strikingly the girl resembled him. Perhaps the resemblance stirred something in Lance's sluggish conscience—I believe he was very cruel to her. It was not until he heard Lakin's real name, and saw the little bracelet he gave to Jose, that he knew for certain who he was. That was when he decided to go away."

"I hope the French courts will be merciful to Lakin," said Jean, speaking for the first time. "It was a terrible thing to do, but I can understand it. I do think any crime against youth and innocence is unforgivable."

"I dare say they will," said Jim. "They have a sympathy for that kind of thing in France, and he is an old man and has nursed his revenge for many years. It seems he slipped away from the château in his costume, the blue peasant smock, and wide-brimmed hat, and was down there in the dunes, hiding, when Lance arrived. He must have overheard him asking you to meet him, Merry. Apparently he had been dogging his footsteps all the time you were in France, hoping to catch him alone and off his guard."

Marilyn remembered the sound of the twig breaking among the shadows beneath the pines, and shivered. Lakin must have been near, watching her as she crept fearfully through the wood and down to the beach. Perhaps—perhaps Lance had been alive then . . . perhaps if she had not fled, she might have saved him! Her lovely hands moved uneasily in her lap, and Jim reached out and held them in his strong, warm grip.

"No one saw him go down to the beach, and no one saw him return," said Phil; "and the soft sand held no footprints. Jean and you must have passed him on the road when you were in the car, but who would have noticed an old peasant plodding back from work? We passed several on our drive back from Sable d'Or. There is very little circumstantial evidence against him—only the wardrobe mistress said he did not check in his costume that evening."

It was as though they could all see the plodding blue-clad figure, moving unhurriedly away from the beach, the big

black hat screening his face. Lakin. So sure of the justice of his crime, unafraid and quite unrepentant. Leaving Lance there lying among the dunes, unperturbed as a hunter who has killed a beautiful but dangerous beast of prey. Would they all remember it always? Would it haunt Marilyn throughout her life, exacting payment for her reckless, foolish sin?

Jean glanced across at Marilyn from where she sat on the arm of Phil's chair, and Marilyn glanced up quickly, as though half-aware of her thoughts. Jean reached out quickly and instinctively and gave Marilyn's hand a little comforting squeeze, so that for a moment they were all linked, the four of them, touching, bound together in affection and friendship as they had so lately been in tragedy.

"To-morrow is my wedding day," said Jean suddenly, "and I'd rather be married from Riverhouse than anywhere else in the world."

A little explosion of delight went through her, spreading like a rippling pond, filling her with contentment and happiness. Lance was dead—and she could not find it in her heart to be sorry. She was glad that Marilyn was free of him, glad that Jim and Marilyn had found each other again. It was selfish of her, perhaps, because they were her dear friends, and in some strange way her own happiness and Phil's were bound up inextricably with theirs. If they had been unhappy it would not have been complete. They would have loved each other just as well, but perhaps not quite so perfectly if Jim and Marilyn had still been separated in unhappiness and misunderstanding.

They sat silently in the fading light. The sun sank slowly along the river, flooding the room with a beautiful golden glow, glinting on the colour and texture of wood and carpet, on Marilyn's cloudy dark hair, on the bright copper nimbus of Jean's head. They sat silently, very close in understanding, four lovers, four friends who had come through together to a quiet and hopeful haven of peace.